The Care and Keeping of Camelot
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The Care and Keeping of Camelot

by Roseus

Summary

With Arthur dead, Camelot's destiny has soured--if it was ever any good to begin with. Gwen is fed up with grief and mediocrity and takes matters into her own hands, returning to the start to make a better Camelot or break history trying. Knighthood, rekindling her first love, and Merlin's silly almanac are all just byproducts.

Notes

Inspired by Empires Gleam by alacrity which I HIGHLY recommend.

Prologue

These days, Queen Guinevere had little love for prophecy left in her heart. So much death and suffering was written in the stars that she wished herself illiterate. Destiny came unceasingly for everyone she loved—friends, family, lovers, her own husband—time and time again until after so many years only her and her dear mage were left standing alone on its ramparts. She could have lived with this. Guinevere was more than a good Queen, she was one of the best regents Camelot had ever known, and she could have been satisfied with her people as her family to guide and protect. However as the third crop failing in a row ate into Camelot's prosperity as five armies were preparing to mobilize against them and the castle itself becomes brittle with age, she realizes exactly what the stars have done to spite her. It was destiny that Arthur would bring Camelot's golden age. It was destiny that no matter how she governed, once he was gone it was over.

No one would dare say she didn't try. She was beloved among her people, a political mastermind, a gifted strategist who made up for coming late to the game by spending hours by candlelight reading histories of policy and battle and consulting with the people whose abilities she trusted beyond all. As time went on she did these things to the point of near insanity, mentally mapping all the eventualities and possible outcomes of such and such trade deal and so and so's alliance until for every little thing that happened she could map the influences it had on twelve other corners of the Kingdom at a given time, weaving a great tangled spiderweb of political valences that only she could see. They would have called it madness if it wasn't the only thing holding Camelot up. But she came to it again and again and knew it wasn't good enough. Not if she couldn't keep her people happy, when it was the only thing left she could do.

It was the fifth summer after Arthur's death when Merlin apprehended a sorcerer for an unusual crime. Merlin hated that part of his job, when it cut so close to the old days of burnings and executions, and he looked even more hollow for it than he did on a day to day basis. The lion's share of the man had never come back from the shores of Avalon, but he was unfailing in his duties to the crown. Now, he stripped the magic of the sorcerer as he screamed with an expression one could almost mistake for dispassion, if you didn't know him.

"For perverting the natural order by attempting to bend time, you are so punished. Begone," Merlin said, eyes shuttered. Somewhere distant Gwen thought she couldn't even blame the offending sorcerer for trying.

And then less distant.

And then not distant at all.

It haunted her as she didn't sleep, chasing her heels as she paced across the stone floor of her chambers. The stars were out and she had a fancy to rip each one of them down from the sky. Her head rung like a bell. *I could fix it. I could save everyone. Everyone could be happy.* If Camelot refused to be prosperous without Arthur, then she would damn well bring back Arthur.

She summoned Merlin before even breakfast.

"It's—It's heresy against the Old Religion," Merlin protested. "It's against the laws of nature. You can't make that choice for everyone else."

"Isn't that why I was made Queen?" she responded sadly.

"Children will go unborn. Lovers will never meet. People will die, Gwen."

“I’m willing to accept that.” Guinevere searched his face for the old fire to appeal to, the compulsion to rush headlong into danger, but it wasn’t there. She felt bad about what she would have to do instead. It was a line they had never crossed, the one boundary they held sacred after all these years, and more than that was plain unfair. She would do it anyways. “Think of it. I will live my life without ever seeing him again. But Merlin, you might live ten. Twenty. Tell me it doesn’t pay to break the law sometimes.”

Merlin was broken. He agreed.

There were preparations. She had to be patient as Merlin drew up rituals from the druids, the sidhe, and countless other schools of magic to create something that wouldn’t fail like the previous sorcerer’s attempt. Only one of them could go, and Merlin forfeited the right without a fight, needing this one thing to be out of his hands. She made plans, because it was what she did best. What people would need to hear when, who to ally and what enemies to prioritize the disposal of, what resources she could claim for herself. Merlin gave her a coin wrapped in twine to wear around her neck and made her memorize the words that would change it into a written guide of the past to be future. And on a fine day, Gwen put on a commoner’s dress and they spirited away to an outlying meadow and carved runes into a circle of Hawthorne trees.

Merlin’s chanting may as well have been a childhood lullaby. Torrents of wind picked up around them and the blue sky clouded over and crackled with lightning.

Gwen was crying now, against her best efforts. “I love you.”

Merlin gave her a watery smile. “I’ll see you soon.”

The crack of thunder is deafening, the white of thunder is blinding.

From the Top

Gwen wakes in a large bed with a draped silk canopy, and thinks it has all been for naught. She almost cries, but forces it down and resigns herself to the burdens life refuses to let her shake.

"Gwen!"

Her blood freezes in her veins. The voice is sweet as honey and clear as bells, edged with strength and defiance in even its resting tone.

"Oh, thank god—GAIUS! Someone fetch Gauis!"

Gwen considers crying again. Pushes it down again. Instead she turns her face towards the Lady Morgana and wonders.

Morgana is sitting at her bedside, one hand clasped over her throat where it's framed by her coifed locks. Her rose petal lips are parted with Gwen's name still on her tongue. Her eyes are bright with youth and are unpainted with the thick kohl of her later years. Gwen realizes that this is Morgana's room and Morgana's bed, and feels a surge of emotion she could only specify as everything, everything at once to know it has worked.

"My lady," Gwen croaks, because this is her lady, the Morgana not yet polluted with madness and betrayal who laughed with her in the gardens and fumbled her needlework and hasn't yet slaughtered more than a fly. This is her first love. Yes, Gwen has always given her affections freely and in her youth often had more than one ball in the air so to speak, but this is the first. The seer-princess, who she may someday have to kill.

Morgana touches Gwen's face, swiping her thumb across her cheek before withdrawing her hand. Gwen can't help but stare, but quickly shifts into business mode and asks what could have possibly happened, seeing as she absolutely doesn't remember anything.

"You disappeared last night. One of our knights found you just off the road into the city unconscious in a circle of scorched earth. Gaius says you're perfectly unhurt—it's all a horrid mystery," Morgana says. This strikes Gwen as less than ideal. That kind of story was bound to raise questions sooner or later, so she had better get to coming up with a convincing cover.

A tidy knock that she knows belongs to Gaius comes from the door. Morgana ushers the old man in and Gwen tries and fails again not to stare. It's been so long since she's seen him. He asks her if she had any pains and she denies it, not even lying. There's not a sore bone in her body, and she meets all his tests for clear cognition. Merlin kept her safe.

Gaius gives her a clean bill of health and a pat on the hand before returning to his duties. Morgana breathes a sigh of relief and lapses into silence before reaching behind her back and tugging open the laces of her dress.

"My lady?" Gwen squeaks.

"Don't you dare get up, Gwen, I can dress for dinner on my own."

Gwen exhales quietly, listening to her pulse in her ears and feeling quite young. She presses a hand over her heart to feel it beat, only to realize something is missing.

"My necklace," she says.

Morgana turns at that, a little wide eyed at the desperation in her tone. “On the table. I didn’t recognize it, is it a token?” She smiles slyly.

“What? No! It’s—it’s from my brother.” She makes up on the spot. The necklace is indeed on the table, glinting bronze in the afternoon light. When she looks back Morgana is already slipping into her evening dress—one with less laces and buttons.

“How sweet. Alright, I’m going down. Don’t move from this spot.”

Gwen hustles out of bed the minute the door closes, grabbing the necklace and pulling it over her hair, tucking it into the breast of her gown. She stops at the mirror and fixes herself up decently enough to go without comment, and steps into the halls of the castle.

She can’t say the servants quarters are exactly as she remembers them, because in truth she had forgotten. It rushes back to her now—the bronze bracelet in the drawer that her father forged for her when she turned twelve, long ago outgrown but kept as ornament, the lavender under her pillow, the candle tray gummed with cool wax. It was like a dollhouse.

She changes quickly out of her nondescript tan gown into her old serving uniform, coarser than she remembers but well broken in and familiar like an old friend. There’s so much to do that once laid out in front of her it dazzles the mind. However there’s one thing she will need before all else: help. Only fools stood alone.

She goes to the physician’s quarters.

Gaius is mildly alarmed to see Gwen up and walking, but she butters him up by crediting it all to his unparalleled skill, and the old man preens in his own staid way. Merlin appears from the back room and Gwen wants to cry from relief at how young and bright and whole he is, smiling that genuine smile at her like she’s risen from the dead. He rushes to her side and makes an aborted move to hold her by the shoulders before remembering propriety and shoving his hands under his armpits. This is Merlin as he should be: a storm of fire and lightning corked in a porcelain bottle shaped like a spaniel puppy.

She tells Gaius that Morgana is skipping dinner because of a terrible headache, and should probably be seen. The physician totters off and leaves them alone, which was the aim.

Merlin beams. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Gwen smiles, but also tucks her hair behind her ear even though it hasn’t fallen out of place—a tick that had been the bane of many a political standoff. “Merlin, may we sit down?”

He agrees, of course, assuming she’s still faint. She doesn’t tell him she thinks he’s about to be the one who’s faint.

“Merlin,” she starts, and immediately his brow pinches at her tone. It’s a particular blend of queen and confidant. “I need your help.”

“Anything.”

She smiles gratefully but doesn’t deviate. “Before I ask you for help, know that everything is going to be okay. I will always protect you, as you have protected me.”

“…Gwen?”

“I need the help of a sorcerer.”

Merlin jumps in his seat and characteristically sends a mortar and pestle set flying. It hits the ground with a crash and he places one hand behind his neck awkwardly. “Sorcerer? Well I, ah, don’t know any of those…”

She steadies him with a hand on his arm. “Merlin, I know you’re a sorcerer. Oh, don’t look like that! I promised I’ll keep you safe, please, trust me.”

“Gwen, if you know, who else could?” Merlin was looking dangerously red around the eyes. So young.

“No one, I swear. I don’t know naturally Merlin, it’s. Well it’s a heap more complicated than that,” she says. Merlin sighs like he’s maybe heard that one before. “There’s really no good way of saying this. And believe you me, I have been drafting a few, but it just sounds so stupid—”

“Please just say it.”

“I bent time! Oh, Merlin, I crossed time like it was a country crick. I lived for over a decade past today but it all went wrong and eventually there was only us left, so I made you send me back so I could just—fix it, and that’s why they found me taking a nap in the woods during a cataclysmic lighting storm, not recreationally.”

Merlin looks like he’s been kicked by a horse. “What do I do with this?!”

Gwen reaches for the twine around her neck and draws up the coin, passing the thing over her head and holding it out. “You left yourself a note. Place it over a book you won’t miss too much. The words are āmearca mynd.”

Merlin takes it, lost for words. He pulls apart the bookshelves before clutching a newer, thin volume of herbal remedies which he assures her they have in triplicate after he spilled a sulfur solution over the first. He places the book on the table and the coin square in the middle of the cover.

“If this kills me I will be very miffed,” he says shakily. “***āmearca mynd.***”

His eyes burn gold and before their eyes the book fattens to three times its original thickness, leather binding lacquering and pages whitening as lines of gold paint spread outwards like water poured over cobblestone, forming a glittering inscription. Gwen reads it and gives a startled laugh that she can’t quite stop, chest tightening. Her cheeks are wet. The laughs turn into sobs, but she’s smiling.

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For Merlin’s eyes only!

Merlin had taken every last scrap of his impish love left in his body, and forged it into this one relic. Even at the last, he had made her smile.

Merlin is hovering, unsure what to do about a crying girl, and fuck propriety. Gwen throws her arms around her mage, her best friend, and squeezes the living daylights out of him.

“Open it,” she urges.

“Um, it does say for my eyes only,” he replies, but she smiles pleadingly and he complies with a huff.

Table of Contents

Foreword.....1

Chapter 1: Abridged History of the Future.....3

Chapter 2: Disasters to Avoid.....44

Chapter 3: Important People.....189

Chapter 3.5: Arthur.....306

Chapter 4: Appendix of Creatures

(& How to Slay Them).....342

Chapter 5: Your Magic & You.....455

Chapter 6: Prophecies.....491

Foreword

Yes Gwen, I know you’re reading this, you incurable busybody. All my love.

Hello,

I’m you! Nice to meet me. This is not the strangest thing that will happen to you in Camelot—it won’t even rank—but fear not because I’ll be here to guide you (You’ll be here to guide you, I’ll be here to guide me, etcetera), Gwen will be here to help you, and Arthur will be here to get in the way.

I write this thirteen years hence from the day I am returning Gwen to. In that time there were daring adventures, beautiful love stories, and on my end an abundance of rotten tomatoes, but in the end our suffering is too great and the scales do not balance. Gwen wants to fix it all. She may not yet be your queen but she is my queen, and I have faith in her to the last, faith enough to bend nature’s law to allow it. It’s also selfish. I made many mistakes during my time at Camelot that given this chance I cannot allow to come to pass.

So here I leave to you an encyclopedia of every problem I have ever had and you in turn may have. Read it until you can recite it forwards and backwards or so help us. Be kinder, braver, and open up to others while you still have the chance. I know it’s a hard ask but if we can do that, we might not end up me.

And if you don’t believe me Will has a birthmark shaped like a star on his left bumcheek.

Merlin

“I am so glad that I don’t have to miss you,” Gwen says to him, drying her eyes.

“This is all going to need a while to sink in, but, I’m glad too,” Merlin says, already flipping to the magic section towards the back. “What’s a dragonlord?”

“Oh, my sweet child.”

Gwen flies into her father’s arms, giggling as he spins her through the air. He asks her what’s got her so cheery and she can’t exactly say you were dead, you were dead but now you’re alive and I can make sure you stay that way. So instead they stay up late playing cards and trading merchant gossip for castle gossip, except since Gwen hasn’t been in this version of the castle more than a day she mostly effuses the good qualities of all the people she missed.

Merlin reads and reads and rereads, and she spends many hours passing time quietly by his side, waiting to answer his questions as they come up.

Sitting on the stoop of the courtyard cutting wedges of apple for them to eat—“How did Uther even get Excalibur?”

“Love, you’re a bit of a pushover. It’s definitely a priority.”

Hanging upside down from the balcony of Gaius’s chambers (with magic precautions, safety first)—“Did the little stars mean kill on sight or flee on sight? Cause it’s underlined three times.”

“What one are you on?”

“Questing Beast.”

“Oh, kill on sight, definitely.”

Ogling from the sidelines of the training fields—“I don’t mean to wish death on the father I never met but I would give anything to be able to boss around the Great Dragon.”

“Do you want to know his true name?”

“YES.”

In the kitchens after dark, having a little midnight picnic—“Wow. The section on Morgana looks… thick.”

Gwen sags. “Morgana is…complicated.”

“Gwen?”

Merlin is looking at her with those wide, disarming eyes and she knows her weariness is showing plainly. She scrubs her hands over her face and tells him what she became, and why. Merlin looks very heavy at the thought of having killed her, let alone more than once.

“But we can save her,” he says, not quite asking.

Gwen sighs. “I don’t know. I don’t know what’s inherent, and what’s gone too far already.” Merlin

looks at her with quiet fire. “I want to. I really do want to.”

Every morning she laces Morgana up and she wonders where the scars would be, if it were then. Every day they walk apace and the lady whispers to her with smiling eyes, and she measures it up against the cruel smirk that became her uniform. Every evening she brushes Morgana’s hair and remembers it matted and dull, and every night she wonders how bad the dreams have become.

One such night Gwen is dressing her for bed while the lady chats idly and she tries to keep a healthy distance to the woman who might rip her heart out.

“Lately I’ve heard a lot of whispers,” Morgana says in a coy tone, “about you and that boy Merlin. Apparently you’re spending a *lot* of time together.”

Gwen’s hands freeze at their task, fingertips softing against Morgana’s back. “What?! Lord no, absolutely not!” Maybe there was a time once when she had been a little enamoured by means of curiosity (curse the varied indiscretions her youth) but it really doesn’t bear thinking about. Merlin is like a brother to her, and they have the rare fortune of being bonded both through mutual interest and genuine like. And that’s not even starting in on how Merlin is less than interested in womanly charms.

For some reason this melts Morgana’s regal air, leaving her a little softer around the edges. “Good. I won’t have him executed then,” she jokes.

Gwen is glad she doesn’t pale.

The first trial to appear before them after Gwen arrives is the afanc. They check the aqueducts for almost two weeks in advance, twice a day, always together. Gwen has surrendered to being a victim of the gossip mill, and poor oblivious Merlin doesn’t even know what’s happening when the serving maids titter to see them leave together. It would be a nice little walk if it weren’t for the dank caverns involved.

They thought they had it in hand.

The afanc rises out of the well and Gwen abruptly remembers that for all her plotting and studying she was not on the front lines like this, and Merlin is still so painfully green. In the instant before Merlin can incinerate it the creature lashes out and sends her crashing into a wall. Merlin’s yelling for her, but her head is cotton-thick. He presses a cool hand to her temple and it subsides. He’s horrified, pale as a ghost, and Gwen wonders if Merlin is the only person Merlin’s okay with getting hurt.

They sit exhausted a dark cavern and wonder what it will actually take to do this. Gwen knows the answer is trust. Again and again, only a fool stands alone. Something Merlin used to say after Arthur died as a redress against himself: the man who stands apart from his friends does not only isolate himself.

“I can tell you’ve avoided mentioning my marriage,” Gwen says, not at all accusatory but with a healthy dose of irony at the prospect of talking about her reign as queen whilst damp and smudged with ash. Merlin squirms. “I promise you can ask.”

“Do I have to?”

“Will you be able to look me in the eye if you don’t?”

Merlin kicks the dirt, head hung low. Eventually he won't, if they never talk about it. Last time around their consensus was unspoken, demonstrated in action when Merlin fixed it for them again and again, but that was while everything was developing at its own rate, when the world was wide and unknown before them. This time Merlin hardly knows his own feelings and it's all coming to a bottleneck.

"Chapter six, Page 341. There are three rules. Rule one: Never let your enemies see it. Rule two: Don't torture yourself with it, even if you really want to." He looks her in the eye, then. "Rule three: Don't begrudge the women. You get the idea"

Gwen holds out her hand and he takes it. Merlin has barely had the time to know Arthur but it's sure as the sun will rise the boy is already in love with the prince. It's hard to explain, but it was a cornerstone of their bond, always united in their commitment to Arthur.

"Are you going to…?" he asks, not vaguely at all.

She's been avoiding it, because how can you decide something like that? How can you presume to plan it? It's a gordian knot of philosophical questions covering poorly for emotional ones, but there is one sticking point. "I have to be queen. There's too much to do, and I can't do it without status and power."

"Kind of takes the kick out of the people's queen, marrying for love."

It strikes her like an arrow. "You—you have no idea how little I can do. I'm a handmaid with no status by birth or marriage—no social sway whatsoever—and unlike you I don't have magic powers to make up for it. I am nothing." The fading adrenaline makes her bones ache. A month ago she was Queen. They never stopped holding hands, and Merlin squeezes hers softly.

"Sorry. Still…working on rule three. And you'll never be nothing, Gwen."

Gwen can't reconcile that they're sitting here in the ruins of their success, fixing their mistakes by hand, and still seem somehow more wretched than before. Her feelings for Arthur were never simple, but now it's all twisted up and confused, and she doesn't want to think about it anymore. She certainly doesn't want to be hurting Merlin, especially when she recognizes the look in his eyes so well and has to wonder how long Merlin carried that hurt without so much as a whisper.

She doesn't know what she's supposed to want. She squeezes his hand back, knowing that at this moment he's the only man she wants to love.

Camelot is full of lonely people.

A prince Guinevere has loved once in a time that is past and may never come, who doesn't even know to miss companionship with how alone he stands. Everyone who speaks to him keeps their distance, respects him instead of loves him. Because of this he doesn't even have the language to speak his heart if he tried, and his stunted affection bleeds from him in insults and rough touches because there's too much to contain. He chases scraps of his father's approval like it would be enough to make up for it.

A King stained with blood who allowed himself to die twenty years past and now refuses to be alive. In his old age any love he holds for a person is simply fuel on the fire of his hate. There is no one left on this earth who can know his history and so much as suffer him to live, as

demonstrated again and again by the strings of spited enemies who come for his head. So they blind themselves to that history and hope they can keep the man he never was.

A boy-warlock who has removed himself from kith and kin to serve anonymously for a cause he never expects anyone to recognize him for. He has not even met half of himself, the way he has to hide. He makes friends everywhere he goes and believes each one would cast him aside in a blink if they ever knew the whole of him, and so even smiling in a crowd of sworn brothers never knows the feeling of their support. He only loves tragically.

A sorceress raised as the cuckoo in her own home, denied in every sense of the word. She speaks truths and no one stands with her for it. She believes she has never known anyone like herself, and in some ways there genuinely is no one like her. She spends her days hidden away in her tower, trying not to dream, coveted as a prize jewel and never met equally. You could almost understand what happened to her, in the sense that beneath the surface they are all so wanting that you could almost see it happening to any of them. And maybe that means something. Maybe if she just weren't alone…

This time, no one will be alone. Gwen will make sure of it. Kings have their sovereignty and princes have their knights and mages have their magic, but Gwen's weapon has always been her love.

Though after tonight, she decides it might do to have a sword as well.

Sex, Swords and Swears

Chapter Notes

I don't know shit about swords I just lifted from wikipedia

“It’s perfect!” Gwen squeals.

“Anything for my little girl.”

The sword is pleasingly heavy in her hands. Gwen’s father had been elated when she asked for a birthday present he could actually understand and had gone all out on forging a perfectly tailored blade. It has not yet come to him to ask why she needs such a weapon, too caught up in the craftsmanship and the spoiling of his daughter. It really is a beautiful sword. Diamondback pattern weld with an iron core, beveled fuller, the crossguard of a bastard sword with a ricasso, black leather grip with a cute little cocked-hat pommel. And such nice balance!

“I don’t know what any of that means,” Merlin says.

For the record, it means she’s built to fight nasty. And she’s absolutely a her. Anyone can see she’s beautiful the minute the sharp zigzag markings of the blade catch the light but she’s so much more than a pretty face, equipped specially for how Gwen can use her. Gwen is under no illusion that she’ll wake up one day with muscles like Percival, but she has certainly watched the knights long enough to know that beating someone into the ground is not the only way to fight. What she has to offer is speed and grace, an ability to outmaneuver an opponent until she has a window to disarm or strike something vital. It only takes one good blow.

An iron core means the blade can absorb heavy hits, leaving a little leeway to lighten it so she can use speed where her opponents would rely on strength. A wide, curved hilt can catch a glancing blade and potentially give her a fulcrum to force it away. A ricasso gives her the option to hold the base of the blade and massively increase her leverage. The fuller is the center gouge—the blood gutter—and bevelled instead of rounded just looks neat against the stripes.

Gwen calls her Una, because something like Excalibur always seemed a bit much. And she’s right shit at handling her.

This time it’s Morgana who accompanies her to go ogle at the knights training. Even in the distance it’s obvious Arthur’s ticked off to see his sister here but too proud to say anything. Just to be mean, Morgana smiles at the boys and makes them lose their footing right when it will cost them the most. Pellinore almost loses his chances at fatherhood to a poorly timed stumble.

Her heart doesn’t seem to be in it. She traces her index finger on the fencepost and sighs, a pitiful sound that snaps Gwen back from her attempts at memorizing basic form.

“My lady?”

“You’re awfully interested in Arthur today.”

Gwen stutters. No no no no make it go away—"I wouldn't—I'd never dream of—of harbouring sentiments!"

Morgana looks down at her hands. "You could tell me if you did, you know. You may be my maidservant but you're also my friend."

"It's just the swordsmanship," Gwen blurts. "I'm trying to learn."

She did not mean to tell Morgana that, but she was making such implications and looking so dejected and sometimes it felt like Gwen's mind got younger too. Morgana smiles like it's Christmas, and Gwen's heart simultaneously flutters to see her so open and drops at the parallels to a much more crazed expression. Why can't she just enjoy anything?

"You *must* let me teach you."

Surely encouraging the sorceress to take up a blade was a categorically bad idea.

Morgana strides into the clearing with her sword already unsheathed and leaning casually on her shoulder. Gwen gasps.

"Look at *you*," Gwen says lavisciously. Morgana stops in her tracks, green eyes going wide. "What an *edge* on that one. Is that from the castle's personal forge?"

Morgana opens her mouth. Closes it again. "Yes, it is."

They've snuck out into the woods where no one will stumble upon them and pitch a fit about feminine propriety. Morgana is in her riding clothes, showing the shape of her legs in a way that would give any courtier of standing a fatal heart attack and that loosens her movements from the upright posture she must maintain in her elaborate gowns. Gwen is also in trousers but feels more like a little boy than a dashing paradigm of temptation. Which—the image strikes her. Morgana fell walking the knife edge of everything she was not supposed to be as a lady. How much was she cast as the villainess from the start?

Morgana is classically trained in complex forms and precise handling, and in order to match her standards Gwen spends hours on her stance with her lady watching behind her, nudging her footing outward with her own, adjusting the set of her hips, pressing up to demonstrate the line from shoulder to wrist. If Gwen doesn't think too hard receiving handsy training from a beautiful woman with a beautiful sword alone in the woods is one of the best things to happen to her ever, but not thinking has never been her strong point so it's also a bit hellish.

The sun is getting low in the sky when they finally move to light partner drills, and Morgana pulls two sets of basic chainmail from a rucksack, which is a thoughtful touch because they don't have practice swords and it's never fun to get cut in half, ask anyone. As soon as she says the word Morgana has her backed against a tree, blade to her throat, smirking.

Morgana backs off and tosses her a gauntlet. "Try and get a hand on my sword."

Gwen snorts involuntarily. "Been a long time since anyone asked me that."

Morgana's brow pinches in confusion before she turns to Gwen, wide eyed. "Gwen!" Gwen's face belatedly explodes with heat at the hole she's dug herself into. Morgana's smirk is back with a vengeance. "And here I thought you were such a blushing maiden!"

“Blushing, yes, maiden—lord no.” Gwen raises her sword and Morgana follows, crossing them. The lady strikes out but Una takes it like nothing, bless her iron core.

Morgana’s face is comically bitter. “Must be nice. The only *company* I get is my own.”

“Milady!” Block, parry.

“What? I spend a lot of time abed,” Morgana smiles.

Gwen should be stumbling, but she’s not. Her blood is rushing from the exertion, breathing even but hard, bolder than she should be by any means. They move like there’s a thread between them. Gwen realizes that she’s also fallen back on courtly skills and is literally substituting formal dance steps here and there on reflex.

“Not a bad trade really,” she pushes, “at least you know what to do with it.”

Morgana laughs like bells. Their swords clash together inches from their faces, almost perfectly upright to the sky, locked there. “Is that what it’s like, with men?”

“They tend to be rather poor with…anatomy.”

“Evidently they must have some redeeming features,” Morgana prods.

Gwen can feel the pump of her heart in her neck. She arcs her sword clear of Morgana’s and the steel zings as it slides along the other blade. “Well. Sometimes you want to be with someone. It’s different to be held or seen. Becoming one flesh, as they say.”

Morgana’s cheek is flushed and bright with sweat. Her lady makes a hard downward swing and Gwen seizes the opening she’s been waiting for, letting the blade catch in her crossguard and grabbing it in her armored hand and yanking it out of Morgana’s. Morgana staggers forward with the pull and Gwen thrusts the very pointy weapons clear of them as she collides face first with Gwen’s shoulder and they collapse in the grass. Morgana giggles, impish but pure, and Gwen’s heart lurches dangerously.

“I’ve disarmed you,” Gwen breathes.

“Only because I let you,” Morgana returns.

That night Morgana’s implications come back to Gwen in dreams. She sees her lady as a patchwork of memories from dressing and undressing her like a porcelain doll, from the recent revelation of what she looks like with her face pink with blood and sweat on her brow, from the sound of her ragged breathing that went with it. Shut up alone in her chambers and couched in furs, wanting and giving herself what she wants.

Gwen wakes up hot and throbbing and unable to do a thing about it. The servant’s quarters are not known for their privacy. It puts her in an uncharacteristically snippy mood all morning, until she arrives with a breakfast tray at Morgana’s door and Morgana appears with a smile that’s pure sunshine.

“I slept the whole night,” she says, “and I didn’t dream a thing.” Her eyes glitter with tears of joy.

Morgana is so meticulously composed it’s been easy to compartmentalize and ignore that her magic is ripping her apart from the inside out and selling her sanity for scraps. Sometimes she’s such a different creature than the Morgana Gwen remembers that Gwen can almost forget she has magic at all. But the bare truth of her suffering shows in this moment and it runs Gwen through.

She's supposed to be making sure no one walks alone this time. The loaded question is what it would look like for Morgana to have help in bearing her magic and her rage, this go round. Gwen only has bad ideas, but Morgana is smiling and those ideas are becoming dangerously tempting, and isn't that Morgana in a nutshell.

Their first face off with Nimueh goes quite well, all things considered. Gwen stops 'Cara' in the halls to welcome her, one maid to another. There's something slithering about her under the skin, the cloying sweetness of her demeanor all too clear when she knows to look for it. Her hair is dark and her skin is pale and her magic is potent and *Gwen must not think about it.*

"I hope you enjoy your stay," Gwen says to her sweetly, "There's no safer place than Camelot, even if nothing quite goes according to plan."

Nimueh smiles like she's the one getting one over. When Merlin does nothing to intercept the chalice and Arthur drinks it to no fanfare, she is no longer smiling. The chalice is poisoned but the wine in enchanted to be incorruptible, which renders it quite moot. She singles Gwen out across the room with a look of bewilderment and fury. They don't find her after the banquet, but it's for the best.

It is the first week of September and company is coming. Company does not yet know it is coming, but it is coming all the same with a fearsome mythical beast in tow. Gwen has no excuse to be traipsing around with Arthur's hunting parties, but every time they return she's waiting at the gates, hauling water or running errands or some such inconspicuous thing. She's on a perfectly spontaneous stroll with her lady when it happens.

Merlin stumbles past the gates supporting Lancelot, who is looking as much of an angel as he always does even with a mild limp and a good helping of mud on his clothes. His long hair swirls about his head peaceably, his skin looks warm and alive (alive alive alive), and the sun blesses him red. He's laughing at something Merlin is saying. Also, Arthur is there.

Gwen takes off running before she can think, skirts in hand, smile blazing. That's one of her favorite people in the world, right there. "Lancelot!" she shouts. Merlin points at the man and gives a thumbs up, which, yeah. She stops herself just short of bodily tackling Lancelot, who smiles questioningly at her. Arthur and Morgana share a very confused look and she remembers herself in time to make a vague excuse.

"Lancelot is a very old, very dear friend. Come, we must take you up to Gaius." Something of the queen of old slips in because she does not ask Morgana's permission, and Morgana is apparently too shocked to object. They scurry off like a band of children with a pilfered pie. Or rather, like two children with a pilfered pie and one very confused dog.

"I don't mean to be rude, but, how do you know my name? I'm sure we haven't met." Lancelot asks politely. Gwen makes a little nod at Merlin, who casts notice-me-not under his breath in case anyone is listening.

"I'm a something of a changeling. Just, not from the fair folk—from a different time, about a decade hence." She had thought a lot about how to explain this over the last month. "Then, we were good friends, so you'll have to excuse me for being fond of you in advance."

"I'm not sure I understand, but it's a pleasure to meet you…"

"Gwen."

They hole up in the physician's quarters, and Gaius ducks out to get away from their racket. Thus the unveiling. Lancelot takes it all very admirably—Merlin's magic, Gwen's temporal status, the effusive ten page section on his life and death in Merlin's encyclopedia. He doesn't have the burr of Camelot's rhabdophobia planted in his mind, so it comes naturally to him. Mostly he's just chuffed that he actually got to be a knight ("and you will be again, friend.")

That evening after several rounds of ale, Gwen asks him something.

"You're one of the best knights Camelot ever saw. I need you to train me to fight. My lady's been teaching me but it can only go so far when she's never seen real combat."

Lancelot smiles stupidly, raising his flagon. "You are unlike anything else, Guinevere."

And so she has a tutor.

"Remember your footwork, I really, really don't want to hurt you."

Gwen scowls and readjusts. As a beginner, she's leading while Lancelot simply defends himself. Somehow she still ends up in the dirt more than once, to Lancelot's utmost horror. She can tell it's hurting his chivalry to even raise a blade against a woman but he's doing an admirable job of powering through it. She just wishes she was doing an admirable job of powering through him.

But wait. She swipes her fingers over Una's ricasso and thinks about what she's made for—not brute force, not powering through anything. Putting her on full frontal offense is inherently weakening Gwen's chances. She engages Lancelot again with the barest of prods, just enough to get a bout going but not enough to get bodied again, and she waits.

Una takes it like a champ as always. Her arms are starting to scream less at the repeated impacts these last few days and she's swift enough when she needs to be, which gives her a decently rounded defense. But Lancelot is a master swordsman who's seen everything once or twice, and she's being steadily beaten back without him even really trying.

The same kind of flash inspiration strikes her again as she remembers her training with Morgana. He has not seen everything. She raises her swordarm and begins to borrow the steps of a court dance.

Lancelot makes a controlled swing and *completely misses*. He stares at her with surprise and fascination and in the moment of distraction she actually manages to tap his side. He laughs and accidentally knocks her down with his answering swing. She laughs too, feeling satisfaction burn deep in her gut even as she lies in the dirt.

"Gwen?"

The satisfaction is promptly doused with an ice cold bucket of dread. Morgana stands at the edge of the training field, blue velvet cloak fluttering lightly in the wind, looking like she's not sure if she's awake. Looking like she wishes she weren't. Gwen can't think of a single thing to say.

Morgana sends her away early that evening.

Gwen checks in at the physician's quarters with the intention of only checking on Lancelot and Merlin and leaving straight away. They take one look at her face and that is not the thing that happens. It's good to know Lancelot is as diehard loyal to near strangers as he always was.

They get absolutely trashed and sneak out to a waterfall hidden in the woods. The air is crisp with the promise of autumn and the latent moisture from the falls makes her dress heavy on her hips. They light a small fire and Merlin conjures wheels of light from the embers, and Gwen and Lancelot are floored by the majesty of it for about five minutes before it devolves into a competition of who can throw the most stones through the most hoops. Lancelot wins handily because Merlin forgets he can cheat.

“Gwen?” Lancelot ventures, grotesquely articulate for the amount of ale he’s consumed. “Your lady…” His tone is rife with implication. She supposes it’s fair for the way both she and Morgana had reacted that afternoon.

“It’s so, so complicated.”

“Hhhold on,” Merlin slurs from where he’s face down in the grass. “Complicated? Like, *complicated*!?”

“Merlinnnnnuh.”

Merlin rolls over and squints. “That wasn’t in the book.”

“I am not discussing it!” Gwen stands abruptly and stomps towards the pool at the base of the waterfall, tugging at the laces of her dress.

“Oh my,” Lancelot says and politely averts his eyes.

“Gwen no your honor as a maiden!” Merlin cries facetiously.

“Choke on a cock, I’m a widow!” she shouts. The first touch of the water is shocking but the chill seeps comfortably under her skin. She giggles endlessly.

“God I wish,” Merlin grumbles. A moment later there’s a splash and he surfaces a few feet from her. It takes a good few minutes of bullying but eventually Lancelot joins them.

“I love travelling, I meet such interesting people.” he drawls, floating idly.

Gwen twists in the water and feels it slip against her skin. “Please. If we were at all interesting we’d be having a moonlit orgy right now.”

Lancelot almost drowns.

Some unlucky days you wake up hungover and smelling of pondwater. Some lucky days you wake up hungover and disheveled with a handsome man or two on your arm. Some very, very, unbelievably unlucky says you wake up with an unholy combination of both and the added bonus of two Pendragons at the door.

There’s a totally platonic reason they’re all in Merlin’s bed, and it made total sense for their drunken midnight logic at the time. They had brought a wineskin along and Gwen had had far too much from it while listening to Merlin babble about their battle plans for the gryphon (“pfft hey Lancelot don’t worry I enchanted you a lance. Because you lance a lot aaaaahaha”). Wine reliably made Gwen weepy and it quickly became such that she was clinging to them hopelessly and professing her desire for undying friendship. Merlin was a soft touch anyways and started crying the minute she said she loved him. And *Lance my dear friend Lance I can’t bear to part with you, you died Lance I won’t let you!* It would be an irreconcilable tragedy for them to part for even a

second. If they could only just… lie down for a second…

The royalty in the room was a whole other horse to shoe.

Gwen came fuzzily to awareness to the tail end of a conversation from the other chamber. She was fairly sure she was dreaming, because there was no reason Arthur should be anywhere nearby first thing in the morning.

"…And Merlin says he's a knight errant. Not that there's anything wrong with that, some of my best friends are knights errant. But it's—Merlin doesn't *have* friends!"

"Don't whine," Morgana's voice replies. "At least you know where to find yours."

"I'm sure Merlin will know where she is."

A smack. "Watch your implications!"

The door busted open, light hitting her like a hammer.

"*Mer*lin—"

Lancelot's snoring aside, it was the purest silence Camelot had ever known.

Merlin flew up in a tangle of limbs automatically at the sound of Arthur calling his name. His already too-big eyes went big as saucers as he saw the prince—and the ward of the king—in the doorway. Arthur looked like he had walked into a ritual chamber of chanting druids, utterly frozen in place. Gwen could see the calculations firing behind Morgana's eyes and she desperately hoped they weren't body count related.

How bad did it look? Well, suffice to say that Gwen's tits were covered but she had to check to know. Gwen made significant eye contact with Merlin in a way that somehow hoped to communicate *I just woke up in a room full of people I have at some point tried to, hoped to, or actively succeeded to hook up with and I need you to end my life with your magic right now*. It didn't work.

Merlin breaks the silence. "We didn't have sex."

Gwen puts her face in her hands. "Oh my god."

"What?" Merlin says, a little hysterical. "Last time I tried to protect your modesty you cursed me out."

That seems to break the spell over Morgana, which is good because Pendragons should never be silent for this long. She scoffs. "Gwen *cursing*? Please, that would be like being mauled by a baby bunny rabbit."

"Tol'im to choke on a cock," a mostly asleep Lancelot slurs into a pillow. "Good morn—oh my."

Arthur goes red as a tomato. "Merlin! What kind of influences are you exposing respectable women to!"

"I'm the one who got insulted!"

"There's clearly been inappropriate discussions and—" Arthur gesticulates, "—acts!" He jabs a finger at Lancelot. "And don't think I've forgotten about you!"

“Um. Actually Gwen never cursed. She’s a woman of honor and perfectly chaste, this is just a big misunderstanding.”

Morgana nods solemnly at this.

“Thanks a lot, Lancelot! What about my virtue?” Merlin interjects.

“Merlin, dear heart, no one has ever doubted that you are as pure as the driven snow,” Gwen says.

Merlin crosses his arms. “Thanks. You all do wonders for my self-esteem.”

Lancelot turns to him, so damnably compassionate. “Don’t doubt yourself, you’re a very attractive man.”

And that was the sound of Arthur’s sword leaving its scabbard.

“My lady, please make him put the sword away,” Gwen says as the boys shout incoherently.

Morgana crackles with cold fury, drawn up to her full height and regality. “No, I think for once Arthur and I are in agreement. Because if any of you have laid a hand on my maid, know that I will slaughter you like pigs.”

As if this wasn’t stressful enough already, now Morgana was threatening a larger portion of the room than she even realized with murder. Her face is ostensibly placid, but the eyes always give it away. Her eyes are burning, and it knocks the breath out of Gwen to know this is on her account.

She doesn’t have time to process this, because at that moment alarm bells sound from every corner of the city. Gwen sighs.

“Oh, fuck me.”

Telling Tales

Chapter Summary

> In which Gwen has tough day, secrets are shared, and it becomes painfully obvious that I figured out that the magic on this show as an extended metaphor for queerness.

Arthur tears out the door the minute the bells sound, always ready to heed the call of duty like it were reflex and not choice, and she is both older and younger than she was and she understands. For her own part, Gwen turns to her ramshackle amalgamation of almost lovers and remembers the weight of a crown. She turns to Morgana and speaks very delicately.

“My lady, I don’t suppose you would conveniently choose to leave now if I asked.”

Morgana raises a sculpted eyebrow. “I don’t suppose either.”

Gwen sighs and slaps her hands together. “No time. Boys?”

Lancelot runs an anxious hand through his hair. “Horses. Where are we going to get horses?”

“The lance is still in the armory—" Merlin adds.

Gwen’s voice takes the hard edge of the political. “Well enough. Merlin, go to the armory and retrieve the lance and as much of two sets of armor as you can carry. I will go to the stables and bring around two horses and bring them around to meet you. Lancelot will go straight to the square, and if he finds it’s not where it’s supposed to be he’ll intercept us on the way and we’ll regroup. Are we understood?”

Merlin and Lancelot nod curtly. She waves them to action and Lancelot bows guiltily to Morgana as they hurry out the door. Morgana observes this silently and turns to Gwen with a question on her face. Gwen looks at this moment and realizes their moment of normalcy and harmony and blissful ignorance has already run out of rope, so brutally soon.

“I promise we’ll have a long, honest conversation, *later*.”

Morgana is still silent in the way of placid waters with riptide underneath. There is no time. Gwen turns on her heel and runs into the halls, and is not surprised when the lady follows.

“What are we doing?” Morgana asks in a low voice.

“According to the stable hands, taking a leisurely morning ride away from the danger and panic. Hurry,” Gwen says, reaching back a hand. Morgana takes it.

The stables are nearly empty. The stable hands have evacuated for the alarm, and there are abandoned picks and brushes scattered about in the hay. It’s a lucky thing, because it means they don’t have to take their own horses, which dear as they are have never been anywhere near a fight and would like as not toss them the minute they saw the gryphon. Gwen picks out two sturdy favorites of the knights with nondescript coloration and saddles them with quick, steady hands. Morgana climbs astride the first before Gwen can say anything, looking like she’s daring Gwen to refuse her. Gwen wouldn’t have anyways, and the minute she’s in the saddle they ride out.

They cut straight across the grounds, leaping a fence or two, and Morgana's mouth firms at the urgency of it all. When they come upon the armory Merlin is already appearing from the entrenched stone passage, juggling mail and chest plates and a lance twice as tall as he is. Gwen is cursing profusely in her head as they blunder their way through packing the equipment onto the horses, save one set of armor. Gwen shimmies into chainmail and she feels Morgana's eyes on her like a ten-pound weight. Once the lance is tied down merlin steps in to feed the armor plating over her head, but Morgana stops him dead.

"That's enough," she snaps, and slides off her mount. Morgana takes the great metal shell from him and fixes it to Gwen herself, looking uncompromisingly at the buckles she's yanking at and not Gwen's face. The final touch is a full helmet that weighs much heavier than any crown. Morgana pushes the lead of her horse into Merlin's hand, and he gets the picture and scrambles on while Morgana helps boost Gwen into the saddle of the other and slides behind her, closing her arms around Gwen's middle. They take off at a full gallop to the square where the gryphon should be. Every time hooves strike stone Gwen can feel it from her hips up to the top of her skull.

Grotesque screeches reach them as they approach the square and Gwen's grip tightens with vindication that the gryphon is exactly where it's supposed to be. Before they come around the corner Lancelot runs up beside Merlin's horse and Merlin has enough good luck to land on his feet when he jumps off to meet him. But the gryphon is hissing and striking out at the circle of knights across the square from them, and getting into armor takes too damn long—

"Get off," she orders Morgana. And she doesn't know what exactly Morgana thinks is happening, but it isn't this. It's not that her maidservant is going to try to ride into battle against a creature that slays knights like mice. Morgana obeys unthinkingly, shouting after Gwen when she sees her bring the horse around and charge into the square.

This is a really, really terrible idea, Gwen thinks as she pincers the creature between herself and the phalanx of Arthur's men. It turn to rear at the newest threat, claws bearing down hard towards Gwen's head. There's no way she can get fully clear on her own, but she pulls the horses reins and it rears as she draws Una from her scabbard, ready to at least give the fucker some nasty carpal tunnel. The steel sings, and the talons are close, but it will not be a death blow because *she will not die*. But when she braces for pain, the limbs fall short and only score the horse's shoulder. Behind it, the phalanx's blades are bloody. They have slashed open the gryphon's hind legs.

The beast whirls towards them and Gwen sees it like time has slowed. She can count the individual heartbeats in her ear as the great tawny wing sweeps over her head and blots out the sky like a stormfront. The shadow of it washes over her face, and she sees each feather, the primaries like stacked blades of bronze longswords, the stripe of white through its middle, the down pale and soft under the joint of its shoulder. The last bones in the wing, she remembers, are called the phalanx. She draws back and stabs through the meat of its shoulder.

Her eardrums pop from the gryphon's scream, but she doesn't falter. Una tears through muscle and tendon until finally she feels the whole joint dislodge. Damned on both ends, the creature tries to raise its wings and beat a retreat just as it had the first time around, but the massacred one hangs limp at its side painting dark sweeps of blood across the cobblestone. It turns back to her instead, feet scrabbling on the stone in their fury to get to her. She tries to steer away but the horse is panicked and flagging not to mention bleeding all over the place, and she can hear Arthur shouting orders—*help him, he's our ally*—but it's all happening very fast.

It's all happening very fast. One moment the gryphon is inches from separating her head from her body, the next Lancelot is slamming into the thing hard enough to drive the enchanted lance clean through it. He's knocked off his horse but the thing goes down like the inevitable collapse of an old

stone battlement.

Gwen stares at the gryphon, messily slaughtered on the very steps of the castle. Lancelot stares at Gwen, pulling off his helmet like he doesn't know how it got there. Camelot's finest, including Arthur, stare at all of them. No one knows exactly how they got here, but the thing is killed.

They're saved from their own bewilderment by Uther stumbling out of the castle with the air of a man who has slept through an important engagement. He sneers at the corpse like it could still be intimidated by him with a hole straight through its intestines. "Camelot is once more safe from unnatural threats. Excellent work, my son."

Arthur looks somewhere off his shoulder. "I couldn't take the credit. We were saved by these men, strangers to us."

And yes, knights are supposed to be men. She is literally painfully aware of the fact, as her chest plate is trying to crush her breasts into her ribs. It's almost as dissonant an experience to realize Arthur is referring to her as it is to watch him say his words of genuine gratitude while still also eyeing Lancelot like he's measuring for a coffin. Uther scans Gwen and Lancelot up and down with an expected amount of distaste.

"Who are they? Not knights of ours." he says imperiously.

Lancelot bows gracefully. "I am called Lancelot, sire. I am not of Camelot originally but it is my life's dream to serve her."

Uther looks to Gwen expectantly. Gwen sweats under her pounds upon pounds of armor. If she speaks…

Morgana's voice rings clear through the courtyard. "The other is named Britomart." She strides to Gwen's side, carefully avoiding getting blood on her slippers. "And he is my chosen champion."

Uther's frown deepens. "And what manner of man is he, to warrant such an honor out of the service of Camelot?"

It's not really a question, but Morgana treats it as such. "A great one. The both of them are knights errant of incredible virtue and skill. I would much sooner trust my honor to Britomart than any of the children you command. No offense," she waves to the knights.

"I don't even know where to start," Arthur mutters.

"Whatever childish notion has gripped you, you had best forget it. Lancelot, Britomart, I thank you for your aid. We will not be needing it again," Uther says, and settled with the matter turns an reenters the castle. Gwen urges her injured horse away before anyone can start asking questions.

Britomart. *Britomart.* As in Britomartis, Cretan mountain goddess of chastity. If Morgana had something to say, she should have just said it. But no, she called Gwen Britomart and sadistically saddled her with a chivalric claim. Champion. The word burns in her brain all day as her bruised body protests with every turn and twist. Morgana watches her work with a clear sense of expectation. Gwen did promise her something, after all. Eventually Gwen twinges a little too noticeably and Morgana's brows draw together as she puts one and two together and realizes what Gwen must be feeling—physically.

"You should rest," Morgana says. "You've done more than enough for today." She's not exactly

repentant, but maybe a little bashful. At least her voice is tender enough.

Gwen takes the opening and runs. “Right. Thank you my lady, I think I’ll just return to my quarters __”

“Gwen,” Morgana cautions. Gwen sighs and bites her lip. Morgana doesn’t understand that ignorance is bliss. She doesn’t know Gwen just wants to spend a little longer living the old ways, when they were just tender hearted girls in living in a castle that sheltered them. But it’s a bad fit, an old summer dress long outgrown, and history is knocking at their door.

“I’ll come back,” Gwen finally says. “Tonight. I’ll explain everything.”

Gwen sleeps all afternoon, dreaming of standing on mountains tall enough to throw yourself off and choosing not to. When she wakes she goes to Merlin in the physician’s quarters.

The minute he sees her Merlin immediately crushes her in a hug. Gaius clears his throat pointedly and they spring apart. Merlin smiles. “You are a legend.”

“Am I?” she says, not even fishing. She supposes she has accidentally made herself a part of the legend now, in a different way than before. One with more stabbing and glory and whole-body bruises.

They retire to an abandoned cellar found during their many hours of reading. Merlin chatters on absently about his day. All equipment has been returned to the armory, Lancelot is taking a nap in back, and they’re now restocked in digitalis and yarrow. He looks so happy, unwound and unartful. She hopes she won’t undo that balance.

“Merlin,” she eventually interjects, “I want to tell Morgana what I know.”

“Okay.”

Gwen blinks. “What?”

Merlin sighs. “Listen. I know you see her as this great evil, but she’s not that yet. She’s just Morgana.”

Gwen can read between the lines. *You’re condemning someone for an action they have yet to commit.* And it’s not that simple, but when he says it like that it is, and suddenly she’s ashamed. Still. “You’re not going to ask me if I’m being…partial?”

He smiles. “Gwen, you fall in love with everyone you meet. It’s not bias if you’re biased towards everyone.”

She laughs a little. Her heart runs away with her on a regular basis, it’s true. Some would call it a weakness of judgement, but in her estimation she’s just been lucky to know the most wonderful people in the world. It’s so much easier to give love than withhold it. Still, she doesn’t know if he grasps exactly what Morgana means to her. It’s not one piece in a pattern, because in many ways it precluded the pattern. As a naïve adolescent Gwen had had to learn how to be in love with Morgana from the ground up, to discover and chose what that meant. Falling for boys was easy and went as prescribed; falling for Morgana was a bolt out of the blue.

She asks Merlin if he had a first love, and he seems to catch her meaning. He tells her about a boy from the neighboring village who came to sell pumpkins. She laughs at the right places in his descriptions of Ealdor and his eyes sparkle with delight. Her blood settles and she thinks it will be enough for her to handle herself.

She sighs. “Shall we visit the princess?”

Merlin pats her hand. “Let’s go see your witch.”

Gwen has forgotten how to knock, honest. She tries and her knuckles connect all wrong and it sounds just pitiful. Morgana still answers despite the pitiful quality of the knock. Gwen is aware she looks a sight, run ragged from her day of trials, sweating nervously, standing stock-still in the doorway.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come back,” Morgana says.

“Well I would have to eventually. Unless I quit the service—but I would never do that! Just. I’m beholden aren’t I—dear lord someone shut me up.” Morgana giggled and it was her saving grace. Gwen hadn’t babbled like that in years. “There’s a lot I have to tell you.”

“I get that impression,” Morgana nods.

“Too much to tell alone. So I brought a guest,” Gwen gestures to her left, and Merlin leans into sight from around the doorframe, grinning bashfully.

“Hello Morgana. I’m a Sorcerer.”

As far as openers go, it was solid.

Morgana gapes. “You—” she grabs them by the arms and drags them inside, slamming the door behind her. “You can’t just say that!”

“Don’t worry, I cast notice-me-not on us before we came. Both the eye and the ear will kind of—slide off of us if we don’t want to be observed. Very helpful, that.”

Morgana’s hand presses to her mouth, pulls through her hair. “Why are you saying this?” She’s staring Merlin down even as her arms cross protectively over her middle. Something breaks in Merlin’s eyes, and Gwen realizes that in this moment Merlin has never been rejected for his magic. Lancelot and Gwen had accepted him with no questions, and Gaius was cautious but supportive. He’s seeing the potential for it and freezing, now.

She summons up her authoritative tone, but it comes out more doting. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of silly old Merlin. I know you know better than your father, you must be willing to suffer a sorcerer who spills more wine than he pours and frees snared rabbits.”

Merlin revives a little at the prods to his dignity. “Am I wearing a sign? Free to insult, no retaliation?” Morgana giggles a little despite herself, and he scowls facetiously. “Did Arthur put it there?”

She laughs, coming back to herself properly. “Alright,” she says, and sits down heavily at her vanity. “Alright, you didn’t actually answer my question.”

“Okay good, I’ve got a whole speech planned,” Merlin says, and gesticulates grandly. “*I* am a warlock. It’s a nicer term than sorcerer because the King isn’t constantly shouting it like a curse and no one gets sentenced to death for it. You might equally say mage or magician or wizard or just person with magic—witch is a bit sticky depending on circumstance. It wasn’t something I chose. I was born a warlock, I could use magic from before I could speak. Is that something you ever thought about..?”

“Yes,” Morgana replies, totally opaque.

“Well that’s how it is. I was born a warlock and there’s nothing I can do about it so it’s perhaps a smidge unjust that people would like to kill me about it. Do you follow?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s all true. But if I had a choice, Morgana, I wouldn’t chose not to be a warlock. I’d chose to be a warlock all over again. Because there’s *nothing wrong with magic*. It doesn’t corrupt the mind any more than any other power, and it doesn’t mean harm more than any other tool. All kinds of people use all kinds of magic, and that’s okay, that’s good, whether it’s me, or highborn noblemen, or the little old woman who tailors your gowns… or you.”

Morgana starts back as if struck. She looks to Gwen and her face can’t seem to make the jump to accusing, but it’s close. Gwen prays she’s doing the right thing.

“Gwen told you about my dreams,” she says cautiously.

“In a way. The short answer is, we know you have magic and we don’t want you to have to go through it alone. If you wanted, I could even teach you—"

“Yes.”

Gwen is surprised to find Morgana’s green eyes keen with determination. Her craving for knowledge was always a constant.

“I have no earthly idea what is happening but I want to learn. But if we could please leave that alone for a while, I need to think. But Gwen,” Morgana says, danger in her voice, “this is hardly an explanation for why you *slaughtered a giant bird-lion on the front steps*.”

“Sorry sweet,” Gwen says with failing cheer, “one demanded the other.”

And she stops. Morgana is waiting for her to say something that will make sense, and all she has to offer is the opposite. It’s not very queenly to drag ones feet, but being with Morgana makes her not care so much to be queen. That’s a very dangerous thought.

Instead of speaking, Gwen shuffles onto Morgana’s bed even though it’s been many years since she became too old for such an imposition, and many more if you count the ones that only exist in her memory. She pats the spot beside her and an overwhelmed and confused Morgana welcomes the simplicity of it and scoots beside her, laying her head in Gwen’s lap. Merlin sends Gwen a long suffering look that definitely says something about her discretion in mixed company and she sticks out her tongue while her lady can’t see. It’s all a game. It’s all a fable.

“Let me tell you a story.”

Once upon a time there was a Kingdom where destiny was not stars, but sparkling golden chains binding people and places and times together.

The Kingdom was ruled by a wrathful Old King, and linked to him were a Prince and a Princess, and linked to them a Servant and a Maid, respectively. The Prince was born to do great things. As a young man he pursued many great feats, but he felt the chain between him and his father was too far to bridge, and the chain to his servant too heavy and cumbersome. He was wrong though—it was the opposite. His father was a dead weight of malice and stifling tradition who was chained by

past wrongs to a million other small things, too heavy by far for any mortal man to move forward. It was his faithful servant, actually a powerful warlock, who secretly guided and protected him on all his adventures, dragging forward the weight of a hundred men.

The King was also linked to the Princess. She had no warlock to help her lift her burden, and her maid was just a maid. The maid as well came to suffer for it: her own father was strangled to death of the endless web of the King's chains. Eventually the princess discovered her own magic, and after much suffering used it to forge a blade that could cut all her bonds. All of them. *No one is supposed to live like that*, the people said*, it would drive a person insane*. But she did it anyways and disappeared into the night. The maid, unmoored from her lady, forged a new bond to the Prince and they were married. The Princess's bonds rusted to nothing again and again until she was just as empty and hateful as her father, even after the Old King had died.

And I should say this isn't a very nice story. The Princess brought a war down on the kingdom, and many fought and many died. One took up the Princess's blade and slew the Prince, now the New King, who all had thought would be held by his beautiful chains til he was old and grey. The Servant, blind with grief and rage, killed the Princess, but it was too late. The New King died in his arms, taking with him his bonds to his servant and his Queen.

Of all the people they had met in their adventures, of all the allies they had made, now it was just those two. And they were hollow now, adrift from any anchor. But contrary to what the people had said, it was not the chains of destiny they were suffering without. Just the King they loved. And they began to wonder if it wasn't love that the Princess had needed as well.

"Why, we've gone about it all wrong." The Servant said.

"We have to start all over," said the Queen.

"Start all over? That's ridiculous!" The Servant said. And it was ridiculous. Everything that happened was a great knot of shining chains. How could anyone try to unwind them?

"By cutting them all up," said the Queen. "This time there will be no chains at all."

The Servant thought for a long time about time and space and up and down and love. And he said, "I think I could be convinced."

With all his fearsome magical power the Servant conjured a great storm and sent the Queen flying back in time until she wasn't a Queen at all, just a maid again. She had never been happier to be a maid. And when she looked down, there wasn't a single chain around her.

I'm a bit fuzzy on the ending. But I think…suffice to say she redid everything better, and everyone was happy forever afterwards.

Gwen's fingers comb through Morgana's long hair, tracing the down of her hairline. Her face isn't visible from this angle, just the curve of her cheek.

"Is that possible?" Morgana says to the wall. "Turning back time." There's an entendre to it—she could be asking about the nature of magic, but she's not. Morgana always had a way of paring down all the superfluous ephemera, as she often demonstrated in her calculated dismantling of her father's arguments. She gets to the heart of things. It would be almost impossible to just ask what Gwen is telling her, something about it too consecrated and absurd. But she understands all the same.

Gwen extends—not an olive branch exactly, but faith. “From what I understand it shouldn’t be, but it only took Merlin a month to find a way, and that while he was writing a six hundred page guide to everything we could do differently. He’s really very talented.”

Morgana turns her face to Gwen then and Gwen sees what she feared the most: simple pain. Her lady speaks softly. “I hurt you.”

Gwen is momentarily at a loss for words. She has just told Morgana of destiny and magic and fratricide by her own blade, and her first thought is still Gwen. She tells herself she doesn’t want it to mean anything. There was no name or form to the way that they took precedent in each other’s lives, even in the ways they had hurt each other. Whatever they did, it was always personal.

Gwen tangles her fingers loosely in Morgana’s over the lady’s shoulder. “You once tortured me for days on end, until you had broken my loyalties to anything that wasn’t you. And then you killed my brother. But when I woke up in this time and I saw your face I think I was happier than I had been in many years. We’re just not blessed with simplicity.”

“How insolent I am, to profane your hand with one so bloodied,” Morgana murmurs morbidly, but makes no move to take her hand away. Merlin coughs politely and Gwen straightens, but Morgana’s grip tightens before she can try to drop it for the sake of propriety, and her lady has a sullen look about her, more like a spoiled child than a seditious sorceress. Abruptly she gets up and paces the floor, leaving a heavy absence in Gwen’s lap. “I suppose it makes sense. You know about my dreams. No matter what Gaius says, there’s no ignoring them. I even—” She stops, looking at Gwen and then above Gwen’s head. “Lately I dream of you. What I saw never made any sense, because it was like…if you stacked two panes of stained glass. Two images at once. One shifting and one set, and in the set one you were crowned, and Arthur was by your side.” Her mouth quirks in a hollow smirk, an expression that sends a conditioned chill up Gwen’s spine. “Maybe I should tell him about that, give him a little push?”

Gwen can’t rightfully ask why the universe keeps foisting the Arthur question on her when the reason is that she literally married the man. She knows it’s too much to wish to be allowed not to think about it, but she wishes all the same. For one, Prince Arthur of the present day isn’t her Arthur, in a strange inversion of how this Morgana is *her* Morgana. For two, the less she thinks about it the less she has to confront how her objections might be tangled up in that second part. And she still needs status. It’s like she’s trying to thread a needle but the strands have all come unwound, and she can’t get them all through without something splitting off.

She looks to her dear friend Merlin who has been tolerating this all like a saint, and he would never say anything but his mouth is drawn and she can hear the echo of him saying *rule number three*. She would not be so cruel.

“Don’t say anything. Gossip is for old wives,” Gwen says, and the tension disperses.

Merlin takes the opportunity to speak up. “Not to be an old wife, but I actually did have something to tell about you, Gwen.”

“About?” Gwen replies.

“Just, the gryphon can’t be harmed by anything other than magic. So unless you’ve been getting enchantments from strange warlocks, I think whatever I did to send you here might have made you a little more…hardy? Than originally?”

Gwen blinks. “Merlin, my own heart, is there a reason you didn’t bring this up *earlier*?”

“There was a lot going on!”

At this point the emotional toll catches up to her and exhaustion hits her like a speeding gryphon. She begs her leave, and Morgana sags minutely with relief. Before she goes Gwen stands on her toes and kisses her on the forehead, insisting *you are good* like a spell. The door closes and Merlin looks at her with pure exasperation. He expresses breezily that he cannot believe the nonsense he tolerates.

“What?”

He rolls his eyes, and Gwen bites her tongue to keep from saying *payback, for a decade of you and Arthur*. They should only be so honest at a time. The lies by omission don’t come easily to Gwen, but telling the truth doesn’t come easily to Merlin, so maybe it means something that they try for each other.

The Ballad of Britomart

“Afanc,”

“Slain, no casualties.”

“Nimueh’s chalice,”

“Averted, no casualties.”

“Gryphon,”

“Slain nobly by our dear friends Lancelot and Britomart, long may they live.”

Gwen tosses a pillow at Merlin’s head. He claps shut the ledger he’s writing in and swats it away. Morgana doesn’t look up from where she’s reverently tracing The Care and Keeping’s pages with her index finger. Their strategy sessions were a lot comfier now that they had an ally whose personal quarters had a modicum of privacy.

“The Sorcerer Edwin—is he cursing *me*?” Morgana says.

“Not this time he isn’t. I burned the lilies before they were delivered. Merlin?”

“Oh he won’t be coming round any time soon. I put on quite the fireworks show, told him if her ever set foot in Camelot again he would spontaneously combust. Snake oil bastard.”

Gwen’s ears prick, so to speak. “Could you do that? Not combust him, but say, keep him out?”

“No, feeding a matrix of ambient magic that wide constantly would take more than I have, not to mention the *infrastructure*—protective runes linked by…maybe talismans? Or even the aqueducts but water is such a mutable element—ROADS! Stone for stability and shelter…”

Merlin gives a long and winding description of the magical theory which Gwen can’t track in the faintest, which is rather damning for her chances of ever figuring out the magic in her own self. Morgana nods along, and Gwen fancies she can see the wheels turning in her head as she mouths the arcane terminology silently. Her studies have been strictly theoretical as everyone involved is a bit twitchy about what will happen when she begins to practice, but she still manages to take to it like a duck to water. She says it’s been too long since anyone let her learn anything useful.

“It would require, what’s the word—stewardship? Multiple sources of—” he looks up and seems to realize how far afield he’s gone. “Never mind. Morgana, what next?”

“Sofia and Aulfric of the Sidhe. This one sounds fun.” She smirks, doubtless picturing Arthur enchanted out of his wits, sighing hopelessly and composing ardent love poetry. Gwen presses her lips together.

“Slain. Did you never dream of them?”

“I was supposed to?”

That’s…unsettling. Apparently they have already made enough changes that there was no room in fate for Sofia to have even had a chance at killing Arthur. Gwen wonders distantly if continuing on like this means she can give Morgana better dreams.

“That should be all up to now. Whatever’s listed next should be our first priority,” Gwen says instead.

Morgana hums, flipping the page. “Mordred.”

Well.

Gwen spends her mornings assisting Lady Morgana, bringing breakfast and lunch when she takes it in her room, washing and darning and lacing up clothes, playing courier to the far corners of the castle, occasionally acting as chaperone in the presence of another unsuitable suitor. She spends her evenings on the training fields getting trounced by Lancelot, and then getting one up on Lancelot, and then getting reassessed and re-trounced by Lancelot. She’s improving admirably, but the man has devoted his life to his swordsmanship and he’s not going to roll over that easily. Her nights are spent walking the streets of Camelot with Merlin, who was quite taken by the idea of sewing magic into the road networks, even if he hasn’t figured how to put it into practice.

He says he can’t do much, can’t cover much ground as just one man with a moderate reserve of magic compared to later years, but the entry for Mordred’s first encounter lists the stall at which his father was apprehended, and they figure if they could just provide safe passage at that one time and place it could make all the difference. Gwen could never hate a child, but she’s glad that their current plan means Mordred will likely be out of the city without ever meeting her. It’s just better that way, with all the memories she carries. And if Mordred doesn’t lose his father now, it would certainly give them time to build a more stable relationship with magic the land over, building a Camelot Mordred might not be so quick to take up arms against.

A safe Camelot means nothing unless it serves all its people, including the magical ones. She’s urged on to this idea by the looks of childish wonder Merlin and Morgana get when they fantasize about it. Or, fantasize might not be a strong enough word. It sounds like a dream, but they have the power and the knowledge and the justification to follow it through. That’s what Gwen and Merlin are looking at when they wander through the secret corners of Camelot in the dead of night; they see a fairy world under Camelot, like the reverse of a coin, which could shelter magicians from Uther’s wrath. *If this cellar door opened to the other side of the city, would anyone notice? Is this flagstone loose enough to replace with an enchanted one? What if I made that lantern capable of lighting itself for gifted travelers?* Such things.

It would be ridiculously improper for Morgana to come with them, so they only bring her the one time Merlin actually lays the runes for Mordred’s father’s escape. She wears Gwen’s red dress and a common cloak, and they secret away to the market as soon as the sun has set. Quiet as a mouse, the three stand on the spot the druid will and look down both ends of the lane.

“Left,” Morgana says with certainty.

“Right,” Gwen says. “He won’t bring himself any closer to Castle Camelot than necessary, not with a child.”

“Left. That just means he’ll panic and go for the quickest route.”

Merlin looks to Gwen, who shrugs. His eyes glow gold in the night. “Right. Let’s see what we can do.”

A stranger’s voice comes from the dark. “Emrys.”

They all turn.

Chapter 6 of The Care and Keeping of Camelot, Prophecies, opens with one very succinct sentence. *If you're braver than me, you'll tear these pages out and burn them*. They are younger than they are brave and have all read that chapter front to back, including the third subsection beginning on page 512, *Emrys*. It is not a nonsense word to any of them.

Before them a middle-aged woman melts out of the darkness, her own eyes flaring an answering gold. She looks to be a tailor by the particular workmanship of her grass green dress, and glossy twists fall just past her shoulders. Eyes aside, she looks utterly normal.

"Um, hello?" Merlin says with a little wave.

"You're younger than I thought you'd be," she declares. Merlin pouts.

"Well met. Is there anything we can do for you?" Gwen interjects, keenly aware of the sword at her side.

"Ah. I suppose, just the reverse. I am called Hollace. You look like you might be doing something I might want to lend a hand with. Unless you've dropped a coin or such but that doesn't seem very *Emrys*."

"Oh I drop coins all the time—would you really?" Merlin says, tentative as a baby deer. Tis not every day one wanders upon a druid in Camelot.

She nods slightly. "You take the left, *I'll* take the right."

Hollace is apparently not much for conversation. She listens intently as Merlin describes his master plan. In the service of his grand imaginings of a secret second Camelot, Merlin has refined his handy notice-me-not so that the spell will dissolve in the presence of magic, the logic being that by that point the mage is either alone or the jig is well and truly up. They take chunks of white limestone and draw runes over the pavement a ways down the road in either direction. The minute the last line is drawn, it's like she forgets the markings are there.

The druid man will run, and defend himself with the only tool he has. The mark will appear to him and he will know it, heed it, and stop. As long as he stands on that spot, him and the boy will be sheltered and the guards will pass them by. With any luck that will be enough for them to get away.

"I wish I could do more," Merlin says. "I wish I could make a whole sheltered path, make a network, with some clever signage, I don't know. But I'm only one point, and whoever trips it is only one point, and you're one point, thank you Hollace, but it's not nearly enough to make a real matrix."

Hollace looks at him appraisingly, and not in the sense that she's measuring for a coat. "Emrys. You are standing where you are, with the people you are, doing the things you are. I should hope you're aware what utter horseshit it is when King Uther says there are no sorcerers in Camelot."

Merlin blinks rapidly. "You mean, they would help?"

She cracks a smile. "Even if you weren't serving up a prime opportunity to spite the King, doing something like this, You're *Emrys*."

"Strange. Most sorcerers I've met are bent on murdering me."

Hollace shrugs.

Morgana says, “How many…?”

Many. Hollace doesn’t name names, explaining that it’s considered common decency never to reveal anyone other than yourself. Still, it’s evident from the way she describes her own network of contacts that they don’t need to build a second fairy world in Camelot—it already exists. It’s deep undercover and cautious to a fault, but there are shops, households, even inroads to the castle already firmly established as sympathetic to magic. Sorcerers walk among us.

Of course, Merlin’s already plotting. If he wasn’t the scheming type before, Gwen’s certainly been coaching it out of him. The logistics are troublesome; they can’t just draft a hundred people into the upkeep of magical forces. It’s Morgana who strikes on a solution.

“If this is true, Camelot is full of magic all the time, but it all either spends instantaneously or lays ambient. Power is wasted if it doesn’t have anywhere to go. Have you ever studied irrigation? You don’t move where the water flows, you move the earth beneath it. You create highs and lows, and the water follows. Imagine that, but with magic. Now imagine a water mill.”

Even Gwen can understand that. A mill runs on its own.

Hollace studies Moragana for a long time. “You have magic.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t practice.”

“Yes.”

“Why? You could be a great power.”

Morgana gives her the ghost of a smile. “Because I could be a great power.”

A week goes by, and no druid is arrested in the market. They break out the wine in celebration, but do not get so soused as to implicate themselves in more bacchanal revelry. Call it a lesson learned. Morgana spends the night prodding Lancelot for flaws of character or, more embarrassingly, evidence of indiscretion with Gwen, but even she cannot hold out against his charms and by the time they retire she even deigns to let him kiss her hand. Merlin and Morgana are riding the high of the discovery of magic in Camelot, Gwen’s body is pleasantly sore from training, and overall it has been a very good week.

Arthur’s coronation as crown prince is drawing near. Increasingly, Gwen’s services are commandeered by hospitality, who are keen on having every piece of silverware polished thrice over, every tapestry beaten, every window washed, so on and so forth. She leaves it to Merlin to forge Excalibur, their own special coronation gift in a roundabout way. He did it once before, after all.

“I can’t lie to his face.”

Gwen stares. “What?”

“It’s the teeth! Those teeth have eaten people. They’ll likely eat me if he ever finds out you’re *planning on using it*.”

She sighs and drags him to the dungeons by the arm.

Kilgharrah sees her and immediately spits flame at the both of them, which Merlin swats away like a wasp. Despite his best efforts, the warlock's posture could really only be described as cowering. Gwen summons up her Queen Voice.

"*Knock it off*!"

Kilgharrah does, but probably more because they're out of the range of real threat than because of anything Gwen says. His great golden eyes narrow in her direction, bird-like barrel chest puffing out indignantly.

"The boy has spoken of you. You are the one who plays god, the reason he never listens to my guidance."

"Yeah well, maybe if you weren't such a bully," she replies, unsheathing the blank sword from Merlin's hip. It floats out of her hand like a paper kite, twirling lazily in front of the Great Dragon's face. He snuffles like a horse and it feels like a summer wind, the scales of his face shifting and contorting like scrunching mail. "I think you know what to do with this."

"And how am I to know you will ensure only the Once and Future King wields it?"

"You won't. You're getting the Once and Future Queen as an extra."

Kilgharrah rears, and the sound of his chains grating together rattles her very teeth. Gwen doesn't budge. Quite frankly, she's seen worse.

"*In exchange*," she shouts, unsubtly wrangling his attention. "You will not be the last dragon. There is an egg, which holds a white dragon who will be called Aithusa. Do me this favor and I will make it a priority that she lives."

Gwen wonders when her expertise became fighting dirty. Probably about the time her first love indirectly killed her husband. Kilgharrah perches again with his wings arched threateningly, but he looks every one of his centuries old, not wizened but weary. Not even a creature such as that wants to live alone. The deal is struck before he ever agrees.

Kilgharrah blows a plume of blue fire over the sword, and it sparks and glows and sings until it anneals again, golden detailing flashing in the torchlight. Excalibur alights into her hands a much more perfect piece of workmanship than it left them. The sword that killed Morgana is reborn.

Gwen would rather be wielding Una, needless to say, but Nimueh is an unpredictable element, and Gwen needs to be a realistic threat if she changes up her plans. The night of Arthur's coronation she straps Excalibur to her hip and tries to ignore the sense of haunting.

Morgana has personally invited the honorable warriors Lancelot and Britomart for the occasion, ostensibly as a show of gratitude for the gryphon fiasco. There are a plurality of benefits to this: Morgana gets to spite her father, Lancelot gets to further his career, and Gwen gets to be in the room to pick up the gauntlet when the Black Knight throws it down. Lancelot has of course insisted he should go in her stead. Hell, Morgana has insisted Lancelot should go in her stead. But like so many, Gwen has seen him die once before and is not in the game to let it happen again. She's starting to understand Merlin's bad habit of self-sacrifice.

Lancelot meets her outside the great hall looking like a perfect gentleman, wearing a forest green

doublet from a certain tailor they have recently become acquainted with. Gwen mentally reiterates her note to never let him cut his hair again. Gwen herself arrives looking—well, stupid. Don't think for a second she isn't aware of it. King Uther was always fond of wearing partial armor casually as a show of power, and as such it's not unfitting to be in his court dressed in a similar fashion. But the helmet was just strange, no way around it. There was no version of this scenario where she could skip it and go unrecognized, unfortunately. At least the parts of her outfit that weren't steel were a very pretty yellow.

Lancelot looks somewhere over her shoulder and smiles. Gwen turns and for a brief, shining moment does not regret the helmet, because her jaw hits the floor.

Gwen did not dress Lady Morgana tonight, too busy fixing up her own self. Accordingly, she has not seen the new gown that she is going to personally deliver Hollace roses for. Moragana's wine-red halter necked dress was usually her go-to for provocation, but Gwen could see this one quickly taking its place in the rotation. There was a subtle genius to it. Anyone in a mood to complain immodesty would have a difficult time articulating exactly how it was immodest. The gown has a high neck, practically up to Morgana's chin, her shoulders are covered and the sleeves reach the floor. It's just that in between, the ample fabric is not arranged how one would expect. For instance, her neck and shoulders are covered, but it's a gauzy fabric that showed the blush of her skin and cleaves away from her arms into a trailing cape. There is also a generous amount of space between that fixture and the actual bodice of the dress, which features a very plunging neckline with gold embroidery. The body of the gown is a pale periwinkle thing with a drop waist, trimmed from above the ankle with a wide train of that same gossamer, showing a flash of the inner skirts. It's certainly a scandal waiting to happen.

Morgana links arms with the two of them and leads them into the hall with an impish smile. Gwen could swear she hears a lute string snap. The men (and some women) are staring at Morgana, the women (and some men) are staring at Lancelot, and the upright nobles of all kinds are staring at Gwen. Never say they don't know how to make an entrance.

Arthur has enough ceremonial leeway to greet his own adopted sister, and bows to them with his best formal smile before muttering under his breath, "*what* are you doing?"

"Keeping the court on their toes, you know," Morgana replies without moving her lips.

Arthur acts like he's laughing at some great inside joke. "Why is he wearing that helmet?" he grits.

Morgana stalls, looking between Gwen and Arthur. "He's ugly," she improvises. "He's terribly ugly and very insecure about it."

Gwen puts an armored hand to her general face area in horror, which might be overselling it. Arthur buys it though, glaring murder over his polite smile as he's swept away into the ceremonies. Lancelot breathes a sigh of relief.

Merlin is in his usual place in the background, and waves enthusiastically. Gwen risks waving back and her gauntlet rattles like distant thunder, which is not ideal. Luckily the hall is so full of celebration that most things go unnoticed. Gwen and Lancelot trail after Morgana as she makes her rounds among the nobles, trying not to look too dazzled, probably failing. Morgana introduces them with effusive praise and makes up new cover stories for Britomart every time.

"He took a vow of silence when he was studying at a monastery out east."

"His face was recently badly scarred and he does not wish to disturb us ladies."

“An enemy King cut his tongue out for speaking against his tyranny.”

“He’s actually so beautiful that it would shame my brother, and we can’t have that, can we?”

“The only men who hear him speak soon find their death.”

Gwen is warming to the helmet because she can’t even try to keep a straight face. But the helmet is also just plain warming, leaving an unpleasant layer of sweat on her face and neck that will surely threaten blemishes in the morning. A shame when she takes such pride in her skin, but then again Arthur still gets them and it never stopped half the kingdom from swooning over *him*.

The lute player must have found a replacement string, because eventually the band picks up a spirited song that begged for dancing, and the ladies begin pairing off with the lords. Morgana shoves Lancelot into a blushing lady, insinuating something about opportunities to raise his status. She then turns to Gwen.

“May I have this dance?”

Gwen nods and the helmet pitches forward. She takes Morgana’s hand and starts to do a pretty passable job of reverse engineering the leading part. Even when she fumbles Morgana just chuckles fondly, so it’s not a total wash. The room is full of candles and bright cloth and shining silver all spinning around them like a maypole, but all Gwen can look at is Morgana. It’s dizzying. Literally.

“I’ve missed dancing with you,” Morgana murmurs.

Gwen cocks her head in unspoken question.

“Is a swordfight not just a dance with higher stakes?”

Gwen suppresses a giggle. She wishes she could say she was sorry, that who she trained with was a matter of practicality and not preference, but Morgana doesn’t seem to be genuinely upset anymore. She has a look about her that’s almost wistful. Cliché as it is, the room falls away and for the rest of the dance Gwen ignores her many heavy responsibilities in favor of green eyes.

It ends, even if it feels like it shouldn’t. They are seated for the feast and Gwen is befuddled to find that there are still new angles to see the great hall from. Her and Lancelot are seated among the minor nobility—not worthy to be seated with the Knights in Uther’s eyes, but also undeniably guests of honor, though that’s not saying much when every guest here is a guest of honor. There’s food and wine but Gwen is uniquely obstructed on that front and passes off what little she absolutely has to take out of politeness onto Lancelot, who is busy unintentionally charming the pants of their neighbors with his tale of woe. She couldn’t eat it anyway. Her stomach is in knots, waiting.

The dishes are whisked away and there are speeches she doesn’t hear and toasts she doesn’t drink. The crown is brought out, and Uther says his ceremonial words and lays it upon Arthur’s head. There’s a little bit of magic in Arthur’s proud smile then, a flash of the king to come. And then the window comes crashing in.

Finally getting her cue is like a solid punch to the face, and it takes a sluggish second for Gwen to leap over the table towards the ranks of knights drawing their swords to protect their King. Excalibur sings as it leaves the scabbard, and she joins them in a flash of yellow. The Black Knight stands unperturbed in a ring of blades, his horse’s feet crunching on broken glass, staring straight at King Uther. Arthur doesn’t see the pallor that takes over his father’s face, just the threat to his

people. He stands with boldfaced leonine courage, even in the face of the undead.

The Black Knight stares. Or presumably it stares, what with the helmet. An unnatural chill passes through all of them, primal revulsion at the perversion of death. It raises one ghostly hand and tosses down its gauntlet.

Gwen lunges for it like her life depends on it, because it's worse than that—others' lives depend on it. She brushes off the sash around her waist and stands tall, not looking back to see how Owain or Arthur must be reacting to being intercepted. The Black Knight does not care who dies on the road to killing Arthur, and is impassive in the face of her challenge.

"Tomorrow, at noon. To the death," the wraith decrees, and rides out like a whisper.

Arthur is staring at her. Really, everyone is staring at her. Gwen decides it would be wise to leave the banquet expeditiously at this point.

She doesn't sleep. Of course she doesn't sleep. In Camelot-that-won't King Uther himself killed the wraith, and the man has decades of military training on her, no matter how much of it has gone to seed while he sits on the throne. Before that, Gwen had watched from the literal front row as it killed two of Camelot's knights. Morgana sees her in the morning and can immediately tell she hasn't slept, the same as Gwen doesn't fail to notice the bags under her Lady's eyes. After dressing Morgana insists that Gwen take a nap, lest she fall dead asleep in the heat of battle. They lay on Morgana's bed and Gwen is asleep in an instant.

A scant few hours later, Morgana wakes her. She presses a red ribbon into Gwen's hand, *a token, for luck*. Lancelot and Merlin come calling and they all walk down to the arena together, no matter how odd it must look. Lancelot quizzes her anxiously on technique and Merlin does what he can with protective charms and Morgana suits her up in the tents, and it's a bit smothering but good. These are the people she's fighting for. She ties Morgana's token into the mail on her shoulder and hopes it will give her better luck than it did Owain.

There's a bit of standing around as evil is always fashionably late, and she can hear the buzz of the crowd, whispering about the mysterious knight Britomart and the shadowy challenger. A good few are betting that she will die, and it does nothing to help her nerves. She's near stress-vomiting when the Black Knight actually turns up.

A squire reiterates the term of combat. They square up. The Black Knight does not look impressed with her, with her diminutive stature and nervous shuffling. He strikes the first blow with strength enough to kill, and the crowd murmurs with disappointment when Gwen dodges rather than engages. Only the blow after that barely glances, and the next swings wide. The Black Knight pulls back and stares at her.

Gwen is sweating, but hours upon hours of forcing herself up again after Lancelot knocks her down are on her side. But there's an insidious voice in her brain saying she can't run forever, especially when the Black Knight starts to cotton on and strike with anticipation instead of aim. The fifth blow catches her in earnest, straight across the chest, and rams her into the dirt.

The sky is blue.

Here's the thing about seeing the sky. It means she's been hit by the knight-killer wraith and she's still alive, for one. Which does beg the question. Yes, she is not as good as Lancelot, but between an aging king and Lancelot, between amateur knights only knighted for their noble blood and her

Lancelot, who does she believe to be the better fighter? In addition, the minute she's knocked prone she's not just here in the forest lying under Morgana or in the training fields looking up at Lancelot in a hundred different moments. She knows how to get knocked down, and she sure as hell knows how to get back up.

Gwen feels effectively reset as she pushes herself up, settling into a fluid stance and waiting for the Black Knight to come to her. And he does come, as certain as the dawn. She remembers what Morgana said to her just last night, and begins to dance.

The swings come hard but she's not here to engage them. They slide off like water as she waits, and this time she knows she has all the time in the world to wait for her one good blow. None of his grandiose shows of strength mean a thing if he can't touch her, and she's so much faster than him it's pathetic. The specter may not tire, but it *is* a creature of vengeance, and a temper is a weakness to be exploited. The more Gwen teases the more his movements become inefficient, uncontrolled.

He makes one massive, lashing swing at Gwen's head out of pure rage. She ducks easily and spots how his arm wrenches past full extension, out of maneuverable range. There isn't really a conscious thought process. Quick as a viper, she lodges Excalibur under the chin of his helmet.

The Black Knight explodes in a cloud of putrid ash and shreds of burial shroud, and the sound of the crowd's cheers hit Gwen like a wall. She thinks she hears chants of Britomart, but that's absurd. Suddenly Morgana is there, wrapping her arms around Gwen's neck and laughing like sunshine. There's a moment when Gwen thinks that if it weren't for the steel, she would kiss her.

Merlin slaps her on the back and it makes a sound like a gong, and Lancelot is practically weeping with pride. Up in his place of honor, Arthur is staring dumbly. Uther looks like a storm waiting to break, but she doesn't care. Gwen just won her first duel.

Any lessons they learned about the evils of drink are firmly out the window that night. Morgana can't attend such a place, but Lancelot and Merlin take her to the local tavern, where it seems like every ten minutes someone new is raising a toast to Britomart. The idea of a mysterious knight with a hidden face appearing out of nowhere and defeating evil in a duel to the death catches like fire in the public imagination. As the ale flows a bard even attempts to drunkenly compose an ode, and Gwen almost falls off her stool laughing when she realizes he's pulling from Morgana's fibs.

She turns in relatively early, begging exhaustion from her epic heroics. In reality she just wants to get back to Morgana. The Lady is combing her hair at her vanity when Gwen appears at her door, valiantly sober from paced drinking and cold night air, with an aim to change that and a bottle of wine from the kitchen. They sit propped against the bed and trade the bottle back and forth.

"I did it."

"You did it!"

Gwen dissolves into giggles. This is the twelfth iteration of this exchange they've had. Only the wine has her soft and sentimental and there are tears sparkling in her eyes.

"What's that?" Morgana fusses, "None of that!"

Gwen clutches the coin around her neck. "It means something. If I can kill a wraith, I can—I can do all of it. I can protect everyone. No one will die. No one will be sad or alone. I'll make sure of it."

She glances at Morgana and finds the Lady watching her, unreadable. "And who will make sure

you're not sad or alone?"

Gwen looks at the wall, and then Morgana, and then the wall again, and shrugs.

Morgana softens. "I suppose I'll just have to watch over you. My champion. I've never chosen a champion before."

"I'll never understand that. Such a beautiful woman, with enough admirers that you could line them up end to end from here to Mercia, and you never…"

Morgana takes a swig from the bottle and Gwen watches the line of her throat. "Never."

"Why?" Gwen asks simply.

Morgana measures her words, looking somewhere in the distance. "It's difficult. If there was someone…well. I am functionally the princess of Camelot, and that means I have power, and certain responsibilities. I could never act first, even when I want to. All I can do," her eyes flit to Gwen, "is make some sign and hope."

Oh.

The air is thick and Gwen's skin is warm like she's half asleep, and she can't turn her gaze away from Morgana's. The words in her head are stuck on a loop. *You don't outrank the Queen*. The Lady's nightgown is pearlescent in the moonlight, and she looks like something of an angel. Her nimble fingers are still wrapped around the neck of the bottle—*how insolent am I, to profane your hand with one so bloodied.*

Gwen laughs and the moment shatters. It's lonely in her head. She wishes she could get out.

Ealdor

Chapter Notes

> fuck dudes this one got long and it's STILL like significantly unresolved by the end, but boy howdy I need to get it out the door and keep moving, so here we goooo
> Also belated disclaimer that I like. don't understand Merlin canon lore all that well and it shows

Chapter 2: Disasters to Avoid, Page 57

If you are going to change our life, you must do it at Ealdor.

After so many years I've come to believe that returning to Ealdor was the moment of truth, and I failed it. That's when it could have all gone differently—should have, probably. Fate so blatantly conspired to allow me to take a different path from that moment, but I stayed on like I didn't have a choice.

A lot of people will tell you that you don't have a choice. The dragon is especially fond of hard ultimatums like that, telling us about destinies that can't be defied to try and corral us into his version of the future. Even Gaius, bless him, won't suffer any option that isn't strictly by the book. People will put it in black and white and tell you to follow all the rules and never why and sometimes I wonder why I didn't go insane trying to keep to everyone's versions of right. Half-compliance is worse than going totally rogue, I can tell you that. When you see Will again he will tell you that you always have a choice, and he will be right.

So there's a fork in the road coming, and you ought to be able to benefit from my experience. On one path, my path, you can turn a blind eye to any other way of life and keep on exactly as you are protecting Arthur from the shadows without ever letting him see, walking alone until the day he dies and takes most of you with him. I won't do us the insult of calling if lying when it's far more complicated than that, but there will be plenty of lying involved to the people you hold dearest. If you choose not to change, you must know that truly, nothing will ever change. There will always be that shadow between you and him. I learned late that the man who stands apart from his friends does not only isolate himself.

I don't sound very impartial, do I? It's not fair of me when I couldn't make the other choice myself, but in my old, old age I find myself to be very unfair. In truth, the other path is one of complete mystery and could end in worse disaster than mine, though it doesn't feel possible. But at least it would be something we haven't tried. For what it's worth Arthur accepted my magic in the end, and I think you already trust him as I do. Totally. Completely. Only this time, when you say you trust him with your life, you might consider putting your money where your mouth is.

Still, I couldn't blame you if you choose to stay hidden. That's a bit hypocritical even for me. But when you go to Ealdor, people will say things and do things that will force you to consider your part in all this, and I hope for both our sakes you will keep an open heart to it.

Will is going to try and get himself killed over your hesitation if you're not careful, so keep him close. […]

Contrary to popular belief, Arthur is not totally unaware of his surroundings. It's just that he doesn't like change or any such strangeness and his primary way of dealing with it is avoidance. And by taking it out on Merlin.

"And where have you been? Playing knighthood with your little peasant friends?"

Merlin's jaw sets as he straightens the seams of Arthur's shirt. Arthur could insult him to the ends of the earth and he would only laugh, but god forbid Arthur insult *Lancelot*. Or that new fellow. Lately Merlin has gone so far as to defend Morgana, and the implications were horrifying to think of.

"Who said Britomart is a peasant?" Merlin retorts. "He could be a King, you hardly know."

Arthur snorts. "Because a King would be chancing mortal combat in strange lands. Sometimes I wonder if you have a brain at all, *Merlin*." Finding new and condescending ways to drag out Merlin's name was one of Arthur's very favorite things.

But it was an interesting possibility, and it was interesting that Merlin would bring it up. Arthur knows no more about the knight errant than the rest of Camelot, and in truth he *can't* say the man isn't a noble. He doesn't know which would be worse—to be upstaged by a nameless peasant or to be saddled with another showboating noble. It's a petty issue, but that one petty issue was the tipping point in these strange days.

The sands are shifting under his feet, he can feel it. Knights errant are all well and good on their own, but two earning such glory in such a short span represented a subtle change in where power was located in Camelot. At the same time, no sorcerer had been apprehended in an age and every enemy that came to Camelot was struck down with little fanfare, which should probably be cause for celebration but remained uncanny. And his manservant was consorting, possibly even conspiring, with the strangest bedfellows, somehow including his own sister. Morgana didn't usually go out of her way to spend time with anyone other than Guinevere, and yet he had found Morgana in Gaius's quarters multiple times. To top it all off, lately Merlin was reading a *book* of all things which he dropped like hot coals whenever Arthur entered the room. Strange things were afoot in Camelot.

"Who is this Britomart anyways?" He bites, suddenly in a strop about it. "What business does he have slaying gryphons and challenging ghouls and you *know* killing that crocotta was just for attention. All the city is singing his praises—literally singing, that ballad is atrocious—and no one knows a thing. There's something unsavory about him."

Merlin brushes off Arthur's shoulders in a very annoyingly blasé gesture and steps behind him to help the prince into his greatcoat. "If you really want to know…" he trails off.

"*Mer*lin." It was a talent if not a hobby, really.

"Maybe you could put on a tournament. Your knights against the finest warriors without a lord to serve. Britomart would have to formally announce himself by homeland and title, and who knows what might happen to that helmet over a whole tourney."

"I'm to believe that men will be lining up to get thrashed by the Knights of Camelot," Arthur deadpans.

Merlin grins in a way one could only classify as scheming, which never bode well. "Oh this is a

better idea than I thought. Arthur, it's not just about who's in the ring, it's who's in the *stands*. Imagine it. A fair test of a fighter's strength and honor might be particularly interesting to noble houses that are in need of an heir. And then—and then!—you get your pick of newly minted nobles for knighthood."

That certainly sounded appealing, with how mediocre his current regiment was. Still. "You know heirs are usually a problem of excess. I doubt I have to explain that, even to you." Even households with barren Ladies or impotent Lords can rustle up a bastard or two when pressed.

Merlin's hands drop to his sides and he squints at Arthur incredulously. "For some."

"What are you talking about?"

Merlin puts his face in his hands like Arthur's the idiot. "For some," he repeats.

"Are you having an episode—oh!" Arthur attempted to recover his dignity by drawing himself up to his full height, face inexplicably burning. "Never mind."

Well. He was mostly aware of his surroundings.

In her dreams, Morgana goes looking.

"Something to cheer you up. I know you're not sleeping well."

"You cheer me up."

Morgana prefers wildflowers now. All flowers are wild. A garden is a work of artifice where all the care a hand shows is to isolate and regulate. Gwen brings her flowers from the roadside and the only intention in them is to make her happy.

"It's you, Morgana. It's only ever been you."

Morgana learned she wasn't good the day she arrived at castle Camelot, ten years old and her father's grave barely filled, and Uther looked at her like she was the repayment of his sins. She can't understand how he was surprised when she lived up to his expectations. Still, she never knew she was bad until she dreams of snuffing the light out of the one person who is unquestionably good, and not even caring when it gets her what she always wanted.

Merlin tells her magic doesn't make her evil. She knows. Her dreams show her that she can manage that all on her own.

If she was evil, truly comically evil, and she believed in the freedom of magic and deposing Uther, and she still believes those things are well and truly right, then how the fuck does that add up? What grand comedy of errors made such a parody of her own convictions that now they hold no structure, no up or down, and nothing is left credible or material?

If someone would just show her how to be good.

When she can't trust herself, she can trust herself to Gwen.

Morgana is the flaming arrow that will light the pyre that will burn the kingdom to the ground. She is rage and righteousness and insanity burning hot enough to melt stone, and even in the face of the desolation she could bring down in a year, two, ten, she refuses to smother it in herself. Better to

put that arrow in the hands of someone with aim.

It's not a business relationship, not even as Lady and maid. Sometimes she swears she can feel the thread of something tangible between them, but then Gwen diverts and it snaps like a bowstring. This too subtly unseats her confidence in her sanity, because in her dreams it seems so *obvious* but —

"I'm not leaving you behind!"

She did.

"If anything happened to you, I couldn't bear it."

And she couldn't.

On an uneventful Sunday afternoon, Merlin tells Arthur he is leaving.

"Just for a fortnight," he says anxiously. "I've just met my mother at the market, there's a dispute with the local brutes back in my hometown. They need help."

"Then ask for it," Arthur says immediately. It's not just that he can't imagine Merlin defending anyone, it's that he actively abhors the thought. Merlin is not meant to be putting himself in harm's way when he's in Arthur's service. Arthur doesn't want him away, either. He ought to be close by. "I could get you an audience with the King."

"No," Merlin says, and Arthur wants to hit something for his servant's stupid pride. "It's a family affair, alright? I'll be back before you even know I'm gone, so just don't…do anything."

The minute he says it Arthur decides he is going to do something.

He won't be a prince forever. Best take advantage of his personal freedom while it lives. However Merlin may bluff, he's not equipped to deal with such a matter alone. Arthur fancies Merlin shouldn't have to, not when he has someone dependable and noble like himself by his side. And in his hour of need, Arthur knows his servant would have no one else who would follow him into danger this way.

Merlin leaves that very evening. He's loyal to the last, and of course that applies to his own mother. Arthur's insults may come as constant as the sun, but he knows Merlin to be deeply courageous, grotesquely pure of heart, and fair-minded as they come. It's just that he must be careful how he thinks, and even more how he speaks. Arthur's best at filling the gaps with bullying.

That same night Arthur saddles a horse and slips out under the cover of darkness. He rides into the small hours in the direction of the village Ealdor, which goes unmarked on most maps for how small it is. The trail Merlin has left is rather obvious, characteristically indicative of far more noise and movement than a single rider should produce. Arthur smirks to himself as he imagines Merlin somehow choosing a horse as bumbling as he is.

It's then that he stumbles on a camp of *five people*.

Five bedrolls are laid out by the cooling ashes of a dead fire, occupied by four slumbering bodies. Sitting jauntily on an overturned log and facing exactly where Arthur has come from, is Merlin himself. He has the oddest reaction. He sees Arthur and smiles the saddest little smile, like

Arthur's both the first and the last person he wants to see.

Arthur doesn't like to feel stupid. He doesn't deal well with being made a fool of as a general rule, though with Merlin around he seems to be getting plenty of practice. He throws Merlin a pointed imperious glare of nondescript meaning and pretends like this was his plan all along. "You should rest. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

Merlin beams and pats the log beside himself. Arthur breathes a world weary sigh and sits, surveying the encampment.

Arthur whispers out of courtesy but still inflects as much irritation as possible. "Is that *Lancelot*? And *Morgana*?" Merlin nods, eyes twinkling. "How? Last I knew she was going to help me feed him to the dogs!" Merlin laughs and Arthur elbows him. "That was a serious threat!"

"You wouldn't." Merlin's voice is warm and soft like smoke off dying coals.

Arthur scoffs. "Why? Because the dogs like him better?"

"No. Because you're kinder than you let on and you're true to your people, and despite your best efforts, you're a good man, Arthur Pendragon."

It knocks the wind out of Arthur, and his brain stops functioning for a full ten seconds. There's something unquestionably strange about Merlin tonight, making him soft around the edges and still, like the depths of him won't twist out of reach the minute Arthur goes looking. But quarry doesn't run towards you without a wolf behind it, and he's at a loss for how to behave with this much license. It can't be this simple.

He can tell Merlin is noticing his uncertainty, and he can't suffer that, so he laughs and cuffs him lightly over the head. "Good you finally noticed."

Ealdor is much the same as any other country village, and Lancelot loves it for that. It is simple and honest and good, populated with people who need to care for each other to live. It puts him in mind of home, which he still misses in a low burning way which to him doesn't conflict with the love of his current station. The city is his love but it doesn't change how he can breathe easier with a wide sky.

Really, he's living the dream. He's venturing into the humble parts of the countryside as part of a royal retinue with the aim of fighting to defend those in need from those in power. His good mood is unkillable, even if the Prince still sometimes looks at him like he's the progenitor of all evil. Lancelot is always observing and knows how love does strange things—he understands.

"Look, I thought I told you we don't want your kind around here."

Honestly, Lancelot himself has his hand on his sword before Merlin cracks and hugs the stranger. He introduces the man as Will. Will does not like Arthur. Arthur does not like Will. Oh boy.

Lancelot stays well out of the way of whatever is going on there and volunteers to help with the hay. The farmers tell him about Kanen, the raider strong-arming the village for what little food they have, and in turn he asks what they know of fighting. They seem a little surprised, like it had never occurred to them, but not reluctant. Lancelot knows what it is to exchange a pitchfork for a sword and tries to give them a sense of the mentality that his castle-trained friends take for granted. Drill all you like, you won't learn how to deal with the humors that rise in your blood in an actual fight.

Afterwards he searches out Gwen and finds her doing the same for the women. He tells her for only the hundredth time that there is no one like her, and Morgana doesn't even try to kill him with her eyes. He never *intended* to become the local Pendragon punching bag, and yet.

Merlin seems to disappear, which is also understandable. Lancelot has not actually read his funny little book of unprophecy—a man's privacy is sacred—but a good half of their party has, and he knows by word of mouth what is weighing on his shoulders. Lancelot knows he can't hope to understand for a plethora of reasons, but he understands what a momentous prospect it is to face down. And if it goes poorly he will introduce Arthur to his sword, Crown Prince of Camelot or no.

Gwen is sharpening Una with a vengeance. It's going to be an eventful few days.

"I trust him with my life."

"So he knows your secret then."

Silence. Morgana slinks away while she has an ounce of conscience to do so. Normally she finds eavesdropping to be good clean fun, but she has actual friends now and the morals of it all are catching up to her.

Evidently Merlin's fate is already nipping at his heels. Morgana sees training the villagers as a pointless pursuit, because she knows he'll make the brave choice in the end. When that time comes he'll sweep their enemies away with a thought, and likely leave the men with their sticks feeling a little impotent. She's expressed this to Gwen, regarding her work with the women of Ealdor, but she had just replied that women could always do with knowing how to defend themselves regardless. Morgana had not disputed this, remembering how much she appreciated Gwen in trousers and supposing the menfolk could stand the blow to their ego.

It wasn't just that, though. Gwen was wary. Morgana could see the tension in her arms, the wobble in her smile, that came from mapping and measuring every potentiality. And from the way she brutally dresses down Arthur for not appreciating the precious little food his hosts offer him. Morgana understood but didn't comprehend that particular experienced caution, and she knew Gwen was glad of that. There was a sour taste to the way Gwen treated her with kid gloves, both because Morgana knew it was because she was dangerous, and because in her mind, it should still be the other way around. Morgana was the King's ward in name but Gwen was always a princess. Tender-hearted and gentle, courteous and kind. She brought Morgana wildflowers.

Her fingers ache to lift some of her champion's burden, and she categorically can't.

Morgana wants so much all the time, and it's her ultimate sin. She wants recognition from her father that will never come. She wants freedom to practice the nascent magic bubbling in her blood, even to raise a sword or speak her mind in Camelot's walls. She wants power to exercise what she knows is right. But Ealdor is simple, and those things lose their symbolism, and she simply wants. Her more lofty ambitions are washed away by the rushing whisper of old trees and wheat bowing in the wind.

Three days of idle waiting for a party of raiders that will likely never step foot in this village. She does not dream here. The only visions are idle summer fantasies rising like vapors from the sun warmed earth, of the dip of Gwen's back, the warmth of her skin, the sounds she would make if they just tumbled down amongst the little bluebells and Morgana touched her—just there—

Morgana looks away from where Gwen is demonstrating a proper parry. Such lust-hazed

impositions.

“I’m not the one abandoning them, Merlin. You are.”

“Bloody *hell* I wasn’t kidding!”

There are times Merlin hates the book. A lot of times. For all it damns prophecy it has him in the same deadlock, and even worse it explains its reasoning. And it’s his fucking reasoning. Will is looking at him like he’s let the horses out of the pasture.

“Do you think I don’t think about it? Because I am literally only thinking about it. I can’t take two steps without receiving a portentous message about revealing my magic to Arthur! My mother has already given me two *special talks* about keeping my secret, Gwen and Morgana went on all night about how he *cares* for me, and you! You know what it means to keep my magic secret, and you’re leveraging it against Arthur because of your own grudge. And the worst of it is, *you’re right*!”

“I’m right?!” Will shouts, confused.

“I get it! Message received, I have a great and terrible responsibility and I’ll be hanged for sins of omission before I’m ever burned for sorcery. But if we could maybe acknowledge that it’s *fucking difficult* that would be nifty!”

Will deflates. “Sorry, mate. I didn’t…”

Merlin sighs. “Yeah.”

Will sighs and sticks out his hand with great ceremony. “You know how it is. If I’m not irritating you I’m dead, and I don’t plan on dying any time soon.”

Merlin takes it, laughing ruefully. “You have no idea how glad I am to hear that.”

It’s the nature of their friendship that as soon as they are officially Not Fighting they go totally back to normal. Through the power of extensive blackmail, Merlin drags Will to sit with his friends at the fireside that evening. He and Lancelot actually get on once Lancelot bashfully reveals that he’s not technically a knight, and no one can dislike Gwen, and he only tries to hit on Morgana once. Arthur is a lost cause and Will devotes as many of his words to insulting him as is logistically possible, causing Merlin to choke on his gruel laughing.

He stops laughing when Will trots out the old stories.

“And I swear,” he wheezes, “When she kissed him he ran away and threw up in a bush!”

Morgana is wiping tears from her eyes she laughs so hard and Lancelot has slid off his log into the grass, giggling like a loon. Even *Arthur* is laughing.

“I was an emotional vomiter as a child!” Merlin defends.

“Oh that poor girl!” Gwen says, hand over the developing stitch in her side.

“Merlin, you romantic. Only you could turn a first kiss into a lifelong psychological scar.” Arthur adds.

“That was not my first kiss!”

Which was extremely the wrong answer. Will's eyes light up like lanterns. "Pumpkin boy!"

Gwen gasps. "I've heard of pumpkin boy!"

Merlin groans for Lancelot to mercy kill him.

"Ohhh nonono. You beautiful friends must hear about the pumpkin boy," Will says. "See we get traders from the other outlying villages, and all our boyhood there was this one family that came round to sell pumpkins in the fall. And for years I honest to god thought Merlin just really loved pumpkins." He breaks off laughing here. "But no it weren't the squash he were after ey. Twas the farmer's son with the golden hair who was all pretty and prim enough to have fallen off the noble bastards wagon, Borden somethingorother. And I take the piss because you've met me, poor innocent baby Merlin has a crush, what a puppy. I razz him all harvest for it, and one night he comes back in the dead of night with a split lip. I square up, right, say where is the bastard and what'd you do to him. An' he looks at me—he looks at me like he does—" Will imitates Merlin's scowl, "and he says, *Borden has buck teeth.*"

There's a chorus of cheers (and a 'good on ya!' from Lance) and Merlin is mortified but warm to the tips of his fingers and surrounded by all of his friends in this world. If he were to balance the scales he'd say he breaks even.

At home his mother is waiting up by the hearth. She looks at him and her face falls.

"There's nothing I can say to convince you, is there?"

He shakes his head and she folds him in a hug.

Dawn comes sooner than he would like. There is one thing he brought from Camelot that no one knows about, and he retrieves it now from an unassuming roll of blankets. He enters the shed out back with Will's father's mail and the stray pitchforks and shovels, and he unsheathes Excalibur and lays it lengthwise on the old table. He sits on the bench seat on the far side of the line it draws across the room, cornering himself away from the door, and he waits in the depths of the country silence.

It's a mercifully short time before Arthur traipses in looking for him. "Where have you been—" he stops, brow furrowed at the sight of the sword. He glares at Merlin questioningly.

Merlin clears his throat. "There's something I want to tell you."

"Merlin, there's no time for your silly games—"

"Arthur," Merlin snaps. "It's important." He waves a hand at the other side of the table. Arthur frowns at his tone and scrutinizes him. Whatever he sees either passes muster or sufficiently alarms him, because he sits down across from Merlin.

"What are you on about?"

Merlin folds his hands in front of himself on the old wood. "You know, one of the first things I told Will this week was that I trust you with my life. I'd been avoiding saying it like that, but it just happened anyway, and I…I think I ought to live up to it, even though your ego does not need the help." He smiles thinly. "I have a secret, and it's a really, really big one, Arthur. Life and death."

"I thought I told you to stop trying to sound interesting," Arthur says, wary.

"I'm really not. I promise."

Merlin turns his hands over to face the ceiling.

“Bemelde muin”

A white spark fizzes to life in his palms, sending up a spray of tiny sparks that fill the room fall slower than heavy snow in the morning dim. It settles with a sound like quenching steel and Merlin’s left with a single wild rose in his hands. The face of the table collides with the floor and he stumbles off his chair until his back hits the wall and Arthur’s hand thumps against the space next to his head and Excalibur’s at his throat and he laughs bitterly because *roses*. Red climbing roses, blooming wherever the little stars fall, over the upturned benches and up the walls, tangling around Arthur’s boots as he leans in. Merlin realizes he’s been betrayed by his spur of the moment, vague wording: reveal *muin*, as in wile or ruse, but also as in its druidic association of a thorny vine, and most damningly of all, love and esteem.

“What is this?!” Arthur says, like he wants any other answer than the obvious.

Merlin raises his chin over the blade he forged to keep Arthur safe. “Exactly what it looks like.”

Arthur’s liquid blue eyes search Merlin’s face for—something. The betrayal is clear in his own. The roses are still climbing and their vines choke Arthur’s chainmail, curl around his shoulder like a second pauldron. His grip tightens around Excalibur.

“Careful. That’s the one weapon in existence that can kill me,” Merlin rasps.

Arthur’s hold briefly tremors. “What are you doing?!” he hisses.

“Trusting you.”

They stand frozen, like the moment itself has gotten stuck. Arthur doesn’t even move enough feel the resistance of the garden growing around his person. A bloom snakes over the collar of his shirt and a single bead of bright red blood rises on Arthur’s skin. He flinches and Merlin panics as he remembers the third homonym for *muin* is neck, and realizes how unchecked magic might choose to interpret that. He whispers *edwendaþ* without even thinking and he can see the gold of his own eyes reflected in Arthur’s as the vines turn back from his shoulders. Arthur recoils, staring at his eyes and sharply drawing back Excalibur to raise the point over Merlin’s heart. He stops.

“What did you do?”

Stupidly incautious of the blade, Merlin brushes away the drop of blood from Arthur’s neck with his thumb and holds his hand out to show him. “ ’S what I get for mixing languages.”

“You hurt me,” he says incredulously.

“I didn’t mean to,” Merlin replies, because the two of them are better at talking about themselves if they’re talking about anything else.

Arthur’s face is so wretched only inches from his own, voice low and troubled. “I have to kill you. You know that.”

Merlin’s answering smile is watery but strong. “You wouldn’t.”

Because you’re kinder than you let on and you’re true to your people, and despite your best efforts, you’re a good man, Arthur Pendragon.

Arthur grimaces like he’s been struck and after a long moment he tosses the sword to the floor. He

won't look at Merlin but that's fine because Merlin's face is pretty pathetic—no one should be this absolutely hamstrung with love for the simple reason of being allowed to live. He put his faith in Arthur and Arthur matched it, and that's like lightning under his skin.

"Merlin?" Gwen's voice drifts from the door. "The raiders are at the river—never mind!"

Merlin assesses their current position—Arthur practically draped over him and Merlin smiling like an idiot, and files that explanation away for later. There's too much exhilaration beating in his blood, directionless energy because this is only the start and everything from here is an unknown, and Arthur may turn on him yet but he also might not, and Merlin could implode from the confused potential of it all. Kanen is just a very unlucky pressure valve. He darts out from under Arthur's arm and makes for the door, plucking a rose from his belt as he goes, no armor or weapon to speak of.

Will is grooming the horses and drops everything when he sees Merlin running, an inborn reflex from Merlin's particular magnetic attraction to trouble. "I'm borrowing this!" Merlin says and vaults onto one of the horses. Will curses and scrambles onto the other, chasing behind him across the length of the village.

"What are you doing?" he shouts.

"Don't know, something stupid!"

From behind them: "*Mer*lin!"

Arthur is a superior rider with a superior horse and catches up quickly as they whip past the vegetable gardens that line the road out of town. He and Will are yelling after Merlin but he doesn't answer, just stays on and focuses on the wind lashing at his face. Speed is good. Speed makes the outside of his body feel as chaotic as the inside. The river isn't far at a full gallop and soon Merlin's yanking up the reins as the rugged shapes of the raiders come into view, ugly things decked in more animal pelts than is fashionable or humane and armed to the teeth. They stand on the far bank in a line, horses toeing nervously at the dark river. The bridge is out courtesy of Matthew and the other men from town.

Kanen raises his crossbow, sneering. And when a weapon is drawn against Merlin you can count on Arthur drawing his on pure reflex, and Will is always looking to borrow trouble, so now it's a whole standoff. "What are you doing, *boy*?"

Merlin comes down from his horse and pulls the wild rose from the weaving of its saddle, walking up to the water's edge. "Trying something new. And, I'd turn around if I were you."

The bandit laughs. "What's your name?"

"The druids know me as Emrys."

The men look about uneasily at the implication of magic, even if they don't know what exactly he means. The already nervous horses sense the tension and begin to nicker and stomp.

"The druids are peaceful," Kanen replies.

"Well…" Merlin sets his hands on his hips and looks off into the forest, popping up on the balls of his feet. "I'm not."

A few of the horsemen start to subtly draw back. Kanen kicks hard into the sides of his horse, barely forcing it knee high into the river and taking aim at Merlin. At this particular bead in the

knotted string of time, Merlin hasn't had to fight much in his life, and he loathes to cause pain. If they're throwing prophecy to the wind and doing everything as they like rather than as they should, he wants to be recklessly kind and powerfully merciful.

But, well. Kanen hit his mother.

Merlin tosses the rose with a whispered find-your-mark and a gust of wind, potentially the most stereotypically druidic thing he's ever done. Kanen laughs at the skinny, unarmed boy throwing a flower at him, but it lands in his gorget and explodes with bloom—and thorns. The vines tumble down his arms and squeeze them to his sides, and the bandits stumble well away as they wind again and again around his neck, his own blood indistinguishable from the ruby-red petals. The sound of Kanen choking is wretched but dry, and Merlin can tell from that that the thorns have not pierced through his windpipe—yet.

"You are going to leave this place and never return. In fact, you will lay down your arms and spend the rest of your life serving the land you take so greedily from, and you will keep to it, because the plants will always be listening. Nod if you'd like to keep the rest of your blood on the inside."

Kanen nods frantically, and Merlin is quite relieved; he's not suited for intimidation and is truly flying by the seat of his pants. He says the *edwendaþ* with pointed flourish and watches the barbarians stare as the vines go from writhing and serpentine to still as a kept garden. He jerks his head at them and they scatter like mice. Kanen brings up a dagger and cuts away his collar of thorns, revealing a bloody mess of flayed skin. Merlin pushes down the urge to wince, but he notices Will definitely does not. It will scar nicely, and he will not be allowed to forget. Kanen gives him one last baleful look and turns tail, disappearing into the forest.

He finally turns to his friends, two of the people who know him best in the world who have never seen him be anything like this, the adrenaline crashing down and leaving him vulnerable. He speaks to Will because it's easier.

"This is me, then. Not abandoning anyone."

Will's shoulders slump. "Merl…"

He slides off the horse and wraps him in a hug. Merlin's eyes well with tears against his will—why does he always have to be such a crier—and Arthur's horse shuffles awkwardly on his behalf. Will messes up his hair and Merlin tries to look sideways at Arthur without catching his bewildered stare.

"Oh! Almost forgot." Merlin lifts his hand to the bridge and mutters *oferbrycge* in a much less showy fashion, and slowly the old, mossy rock lifts out of the river and slots together into an arch like it's returning to its natural state. His magic must still be running high because the spaces between stones flourish with ivy and tiny buttercups. Will laughs disbelievingly by his side, and Arthur finally, finally speaks.

"I really don't know a single thing about you, do I?"

The words aren't bitter, they don't sound at all like an accusation. More like it's truly caught him breathless. Merlin grins placatingly. "You know all the important stuff."

Arthur sits straighter, affecting his usual condescending look as he brings his horse around to face back to Ealdor. "*Merlin*, I'd classify the ability to supernaturally garrote the enemy with flowers as fairly important. Come on."

Merlin laughs wetly as Arthur turns, thinking *thank the gods, thank whatever gods you choose*. Will looks between them and he gets a look in his eye that says Merlin is never going to live this down, and mercilessly elbows him in the ribs. 'Pumpkin boy' he mouths, and Merlin stomps on his foot.

"I've missed you. It's been boring here without you," Will says.

Merlin climbs up on his horse and watches a very alive Will do the same. It seems destroying fate pays much better dues than submitting to it, and though it means there will be no map, no road through their troubles, he simply does not care. This is what Gwen believes in, then. What made her erase a decade of prosperity, her marriage, her reign. That the only future worth making is for their own sakes.

Merlin twinkles. "I don't think there's an acre in Albion that will ever be boring again."

Whose Palace

Chapter Notes

> Don't you love writing a tournament arc for a sport you have absolutely zero understanding of. I think it's very sexy.
> I have a kofi now! https://ko-fi.com/roseus32

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morgana calls them the Fuck Destiny Club. It's just another thing on the pile that makes Gwen want to kiss her silly. The Fuck Destiny Club is very, very busy, seeing as there's so much destiny to fuck.

Arthur is not a part of the Fuck Destiny Club. Merlin insists he's not ready, and backs it up with a list of atrocious things Arthur says to him now that he knows about him. It is as follows:

Can't you just stop?

You don't *look* like a sorcerer.

Do you use magic on *me*?

When did you choose to be a sorcerer?

Well then, what made you have magic?

You're not like other sorcerers though.

Etcetera. Merlin is disproportionately enthusiastic to answer all his insensitive questions and play educator in addition to every other job he carries. No one can even hazard to guess what the Prince is thinking, but every time Gwen asks Merlin about it he just says "I'm not dead yet" and smiles goofily, which is a concerning combination.

It's one of many priorities being balanced in the grand rotation of concerted tasks for the citadel. In the day, the city is buzzing with travelers from the far corners of the kingdom who have come to see the tournaments which are about to come into season. The main event is the open matches against Camelot's knights, which have made the consequential yearly boom of travel and trade particularly robust. Such a thing falls under Arthur's domain, and it drags the Prince hither thither and yon, and accordingly Merlin in tow.

Lancelot has been acting as unofficial liaison for the project, and Gwen doesn't know what Merlin has told Arthur but he's civil with him. Lance corresponds with the knight-hopefuls and brings considerations such as lodging, and develops a signature so he can sign his tidy little personal notes to holdout nobles. He's a battering ram of raw likeability, and will be utilized accordingly.

When she's not polishing and darning and carrying and chaperoning, Gwen is making the time to suit up as Britomart and helps stave off the constant threats to Camelot with Merlin. They are, if not elegant, productive; Merlin tells Arthur in advance that killing unicorns is a hazard and they avoid that debacle altogether. They operate as a dance of gears operating the citadel under the surface, juggling responsibilities and trading them.

At night, the second city grows.

Camelot is an old city, built patchwork according to the designs of many architects, plenty of whom have died at the drafting table and left unfinished ends. Staircases to nowhere are common. Dead ends are more so. Only, if you know the right word or show the right aptitude, more and more of them aren't dead ends at all. Merlin works tirelessly on Morgana's schematics to turn the nooks and crannies of the citadel into refuge and passage, detached stable enchantments powered by the ambient magic of the populace churning through the city streets.

Gwen listens sometimes as Morgana explains it. Currents created by disparities, manufactured absences of magic that magic flows to from points of higher energy, powering idling machinations as it goes. Lately when they wander the lower town they can even spot changes left by other passing sorcerers. Unfamiliar protective charms are tied around doorways that are enchanted to provide sanctuary. A dead end now opens to the commercial district instead of the city wall, serving commuters instead of fugitives. Graffiti carved into the stone walls of a dead end that isn't a dead end if you could show you have the talent, reading in alternating hands—

Salvius was saved here

Visit Gower's apothecary for hawthorne

(In druidic) The King is a eunuch

Seconded!

<u>Thirded</u>

If the gate opens, Tostig of the Insula Orientalis IV is your ally.

Epidia was here

Hail Emrys *(with a little lightning bolt)*

It's being lived in, and taking a life of its own. But their plans are yet more ambitious, and there is still plenty to be done—enough to unbalance the ample work Merlin has in the daylight. He's running himself ragged, bumping into pillars and swapping poppy seeds for stinging nettle. Not a fortnight after their return from Ealdor Gwen ambushes him in a planning session in Morgana's chambers.

"You need to rest. The night city is sorting itself, you can leave it alone for now."

Morgana doesn't say anything, but she's draped on her side beside Gwen where she's sitting on the floor, looking over another arcane schematic. She's physically aligned with Gwen.

Merlin's hands gesticulate widely in frustration. "I can't just leave it unattended."

"We'll keep an eye on it. Just stop fretting about it."

Merlin looks up at that, some thought having struck him. He frowns and looks away, then straightens and looks right past her.

"Morgana, would you continue the work?"

Morgana blinks, struck dumb. Gwen feels panic well up deep in her gut. But if she's waiting for a time when she'll feel safe with Morgana using magic, the fact is that that time will never come.

And that's exactly why Merlin isn't asking Gwen. She remembers what he said, not too long ago.

I know you see her as this great evil, but she's not that yet. She's just Morgana.

And looking at her now, severe beauty softened with firelight, her face in a firm mask to hide her fear of her own power, Gwen knows she doesn't see that evil in her. When Morgana nods tentatively Gwen takes her hand and squeezes it, silently promising that she is by her side.

Morgana's first official task is a self-lighting lamp outside Hollace's shop. Merlin shows her how on a candle off her own nightstand, and she works painfully close to his instructions. When her own specimen lights for the first time she gets a strange look in her eye, like she's gone to a well and drawn up starlight—but was actually pretty thirsty. The sense of dazzlement doesn't leave her, bringing her mind somewhere far away and keeping it there until they steal into the lower town the next night.

There's a sconce all pre-selected, and Morgana repeats the enchantment with ease. Her eyes flash and the flames flare up in answer, and she turns to Gwen with that strange look.

"I can make it better," she says, faintly surprised.

She faces down the street before Gwen can reply, lifting her hand open palmed, raising spectral lanterns that glow pinkish-purple out of the cobblestone lined in a row to Hollace's stoop. They bob slightly in the wind, casting a candy colored tint over the street.

Gwen presses her lips together nervously. "It, ah, might be a little flashy?"

A smile dawns on Morgana's face then, devious and proud. "Only we can see them."

Gwen can't help but wonder at the intricacy of it, and squeezes Morgana in her arms. She beams. "That's amazing!" And, because Gwen is aware of what Morgana would most like to hear, "How have you done it?"

Morgana's eyes aren't lit pure gold, but they seem to glitter when they catch the stars, and the glittering seems to surge when Gwen speaks. It's like the dancing afterimage of fire, and Gwen finds herself staring at it, practically hypnotized. "I've been thinking about it ever since Merlin's first notice-me-not runes. Magic is with us always, and it loves our eyes in particular. If you can make something that responds to magic, and if you can make something that interrupts perception, and if you can combine the two—do you see?

Gwen shakes her head, smiling. "Not even a little."

"Only those touched my magic will be able to see it. Not by using their magic or knowing a passphrase, but just by being." She laughs in wonder at her engineering like it was by someone else's hand, baffled again, and Gwen becomes very aware that they have not fully released each other. Morgana looks at her with such open feeling that it threatens to bowl her over. "It's this easy. I can just…" She conjures a daisy and tucks it in Gwen's hair, touch soft and lingering.

The words set the old scars aching. "Don't go power-mad on me. I need you here," Gwen whispers, and it comes out too honest. Too revealing of all the broken parts hidden away.

Morgana presses their foreheads together and Gwen lets her. "For as long as you'll have me."

Merlin signed Gwen up for the bloody tournament.

It's mutiny. She would back out but Lancelot will pull out if she does, and this could well be a straight shot to knighthood for him, if he plays his cards right. So the day of, Merlin straps her into full armor and she marches out into the arena intending on getting in some light practice, losing, and going back to playing her part in keeping Camelot afloat.

Her opponent is one of the idle nobles Arthur used to complain about so. He has flowing golden hair and a tasteful hint of stubble, both groomed in a way that was trying to be so much more attractive than he actually is. Gwen can observe this because he keeps his helmet off until the last possible second, waving to the crowd. For the first time it occurs to her that losing might actually be more effort than winning.

"You're Britomart?" The knight says, squaring up across from her. "Aren't you a bit short?" he says, sneering as much as smiling. She draws Una from her scabbard and spreads her feet in the dust. "Right. Silent type, what's that about? Morgana take your tongue *and* your balls?"

Well. There goes the afternoon.

Gwen lunges viper-quick in a feint not even intending to land and darts back with a line dance step she learned when she was thirteen. He can't follow either of these actions and accordingly she gets clear around his back, two handing the sword with a heavy downswing across his shoulders that sends him sprawling in the dirt. He rolls over to the gleaming point of her blunted sword at his neck. Gwen awkwardly realizes she can't order him to yield but he offers it without prompting. It's no wonder Arthur complains.

The crowd roars. This is potentially the best possible kick off for this tournament—an underdog folk hero putting down a knight in ten seconds flat. She clasps hands with Lancelot as she leaves the ring, and he compliments her stance. "Someday, I'll learn all of your steps. Then we can spar evenly."

"Someday, I'll learn all of your forms. Then we can spar evenly," she replies, voice hidden under the crowd noise.

He smiles brightly. "Probably about the same time, then."

Lancelot goes on to batter a beefy knight into submission in the very next match. He looks to be having the time of his life, and he helps up his opponent with a smile. The next few commoners aren't so lucky, but no one completely embarrasses themselves as certain nobility might have liked. Gwen waits around in full armor and enviously watches the other competitors strip partially out of their plates and drink water freely without the impediment of a helmet. The weather isn't exactly baking hot, but who ever had fun in full armor?

Soon enough they're calling for Britomart of the White Mountains again. She heaves herself up and marches into the ring to chants of her pseudonym, which is still odd. She spies the royal family in their box, and her spot next to Morgana is empty. Her ribbon is still secured in Gwen's mail.

The Knight of Camelot that enters the ring is Sir Pellinor, and internally she sighs in relief at the prospect of some decency on the field. She certainly never got to know the man, but he did challenge the Black Knight after it killed Owain, which seemed honorable enough. He lives up to her expectations, bowing properly and speaking courteously.

"Britomart. I must thank you for your assistance with the gryphon. You're a full honorable man."

Gwen gestures frantically that she felt the same, but that's a rather complex sentiment and it was likely unintelligible. Pellinor nods anyways.

“Begin!”

The first crack that lands on her sword is potent, but the impact loosens her muscles all up her arms and it feels pure and good. Fighting Sir Pellinor is a lot like fighting Lancelot, and she falls back into the rhythm of a good friendly bout, which necessarily means getting up to her tricks and teasing relentlessly. She’s fast and light and spritely where Pellinor is staid and reliable and classic.

In the end it comes down to her bastard hilt, when Pellinor glances at a particular angle that drags down the length of her blade all the way up to the crossguard. Gwen pushes up into his space and grabs the guard and flips the sword out of his hand before he can think. Pellinor stammers and blinks and finally offers his hand to shake.

So goes the first day of competition. She beats a good handful of Knights handily and they get all flustered and curious about her footwork and her identity. It’s very cute. In the evening she’s sore and dehydrated and exhausted, but also just a little bit proud. More than a little bit proud. In traditional fashion, Merlin takes her and Lancelot to the local tavern for a celebratory drink; so far they are both unbeaten. Gwen’s only just got her cider when the bard strikes up a familiar tune—her very own ballad. She doesn’t notice the revisions until she phases back into awareness most of the way through the song.

The Ladies of Camelot tonight go ignored

Because all of the Knights want Britomart’s sword!

Thank god she has the excuse of drink, because she finds herself yet again totally breaking down in hysterical laughter over this bard’s wonderful work. She should really get his name.

“Should I be offended? Do they sense that I’m a woman somehow?” Gwen muses as she straps on her vambraces. On the second day competition has thinned enough that they are two to a tent, and she can equip herself in peace alongside Lancelot.

He coughs. “Not at all…” he trails off. Gwen smacks him lightly with the aforementioned vambrace. “The way you fight, it’s, er, provocative. The Knights are used to rote forms and rigid styles of movement, and your advantage is fluidity and flexibility. And you do literally incorporate dance.” He grins at her and hands her couter to her. “I think it just gets them wondering, the slight and fey mystery knight who, um, leads from the following position.”

That sets Gwen giggling again. Outside the tent someone calls for Lancelot and she gives him a quick hug before he goes out to dazzle the crowd. No sooner than he leaves Merlin appears, head poking past the tent flaps like a curious animal. Gwen’s glad to see him always, but especially because damned if she knows how to get her faulds over her plackart.

“Merlin! Would you be a dear and strap me in? I can’t find the loops.”

He assents and buckles her the rest of her way in to the old steel coffin with practiced hands, as she knows he does for Arthur more less every day. He seems nervous, but Merlin is very conditioned at holding his tongue when it’s least convenient, so she waits him out a bit.

It works. “About Ealdor…” he begins.

“Yes?”

“Nothing happened, with Arthur and I,” he says with great difficulty. “That was just—

circumstantial."

"Oh?" Gwen says, blindsided by a surge in disappointment. Some part of her was ready to accept how easy it would be if that decision were simply out of her hands. And really—"You could, though. I have no claim on him."

Merlin goes white. Whiter than he already is, anyways. "I really can't."

Unsurprising. It was never just a case of her pursuing Arthur, never something so crude as calling first dibs for having known him longer. Merlin actively helped to set them up when it was a near impossibility, likely more at the expense of his own feelings than she ever knew. He always did that. He decided for others and took on more pain and brutality than was required, physically and emotionally, just to keep the ones he loved safe and happy, Arthur foremost of all. And you could see the nobility in it, but looking at him now, terrified of ever showing his own feelings to the one person who ought to know, you could also know the sheer lack of self-confidence, even *respect*. The raw acceptance that this is his place, as he's been told by countless figures of authority. Which isn't what they're supposed to stand for, this time around.

"Merlin, light of my life, you do realize confessing your magic was just an elaborate allegory for confessing where your heart lies? Really, you've done most of the heavy lifting."

"Gwen…"

Merlin doesn't remember her as Queen but she can tell he sees it nonetheless. "Listen to me. Arthur was not my first great love and he knew that. He was okay with being my third choice because *you were his first*."

"And what do you tell Morgana, when she asks if you'll be Queen!?" Merlin explodes. It hits her like a physical blow, silence slamming down like iron grates.

Someone calls for Britomart.

"Sorry," Merlin says, eyes downcast. She slides past him, lifting the flaps of the tent.

Her head is buzzing with upset that refuses to be pushed down. She's not the type to beat away her problems, but perhaps it's good that she's supposed to hit something here. She steps into the ring and lets the ceremony of it lets her at least feel separate.

Her next opponent is notable because he has Hawthorne tied in his gauntlet. From what she's seen in the night city Hawthorne has fast become shorthand for magic, and while it seems improbable for a Knight of Camelot, it's not like it hasn't happened before. Remembering Mordred chills her. The comparison is even more startling when he speaks inside her head.

"Well met. You wore my sister's work to the coronation. She speaks well of you."

Hollace's brother, then. The pointed family resemblance of his clipped tone is charming enough to cut through her bad mood and she suppresses a laugh, scanning the stands for the tailor. Gwen has to look to the very back, but she's there, wearing high contrast in a pale blue dress. She seems to know mystically that Gwen has seen her, and gives a reserved wave.

The Knight is introduced as Sir Rishley of Camelot, and he's a good fighter, more adaptable than some of his compatriots. He chuckles when Gwen lands her first hit, and it's not because he's mocking her, just genuine sportsmanship. His answering blow is actually somewhat lighter in the grand scheme of Knights she has fought, but she certainly won't underestimate him for it. And he has reach—everyone has more reach than Gwen, but the combination of his build and his

longsword make getting in range difficult. It's a challenge, but that's what's on order these days.

Gwen's so busy trying to keep up that she falls into a kind of trance, riding the rhythm of the blows like waves and letting her body work from memory so her brain won't cock it up, and it makes the time disappear as easily as folding socks. So she doesn't even register how long they've been fighting until Rishley's foot slips and she almost catches him inside the arm. He's breathing heavily under his helmet, the sound echoing as a metallic rasp. She's taken aback. Surely, one of Arthur's own Knights isn't flagging before she is.

A blow that should strike true glances. He is!

Gwen is exhausted, yes, but her breathing is still even and her limbs cooperate. It's not particularly worse than slaying a crocotta uphill at midnight or fetching bath water up and down seven flights of stairs, and is positively miniscule next to both back to back. It occurs to her that her labour doesn't just rival that of a knight—it eclipses it. She should maybe take a vacation in the near future.

Gwen knocks Sir Rishley's sword solidly across the middle and it goes flying, ripped from his doubtless burning grip. He lifts off his helmet and gasps for air like a dying fish, looking sideways at Gwen and sparing enough breath to chuckle again. She thinks they might be friends if they get the chance, though she does have the uncanny feeling that she's forgetting something obvious.

She passes Lancelot on the way back to their tent as he's ushered out for the last match of the day. Tomorrow is the finals, and it belatedly occurs to her that she's made them. It's silly and frivolous and even a bit brutish, but it makes her happy. Happy that she beat the stuffing out of half of Arthur's company, if you believe it. She supposes she must.

"Britomart?" comes a cool voice from beyond the canvas. It's Hollace, and Gwen bids her to enter. Simultaneously, she realizes what she was missing.

"You're noble!" Gwen gasps, just as Hollace ducks into the tent. The older woman looks briefly like she might turn around and leave, but she doesn't.

"You could say."

"I do say! Your brother was knighted under Uther's law, you're a Lady!"

"I have no fondness for anything gained under Uther's law," she replies icily.

Gwen absorbs this. "Is that why you're…"

Hollace's mouth quirks. "Just a common tailor?"

"No! Well, yes, but, not that there's anything wrong with tailoring—just, It's usually the other way around, isn't it? Most people would be trying for upward mobility—not that it's a step down!"

Hollace listens to Gwen ramble with infinite patience as she digs herself further into a hole. With how integral power and influence have come to be to her plans, it's unfathomable that someone could just walk away from it. She is the one who taught Arthur to respect life across class lines, but it doesn't change that living below a certain pre-drawn station is hard on the body and soul. She's never been truly impoverished, but every lean winter reminds her that kindness is something she smuggled through hard living, not something created by it. Though she supposes Hollace is downright middle class—something Camelot doesn't have a lot of.

It's just strange, clawing her way up to her future title of Queen and watching someone else

peaceably stepping downwards.

“Sorry. I just don’t think I understand it,” Gwen concludes.

Hollace tilts her head, seeing through her. “I entreat you to be frank. I abhor artful words.”

Because there’s one facet that Gwen can’t rectify with everything she’s intending to do with her own life. “That power could protect so many people.”

Hollace sighs almost inaudibly and, shockingly, takes Gwen’s hands in her own. They are every bit as calloused as Gwen’s. “My workshop has been a sanctuary for those Uther deems criminal since the first purges, and it will be a sanctuary until the last sanction against magic is lifted. I protect people regardless of whether the King approves of my breeding. Someone ought to tell you that there is no power save what you make for yourself.”

The words strike true, deep in her chest. Gwen’s heart beats high in her throat.

Lancelot steps into the tent and immediately turns around and excuses himself, because the air of them is that intense. Hollace drops her hands and pats Gwen on the shoulder, and leaves them behind. Lance steps back in the tent with a questioning eyebrow, and Gwen just shrugs, trying to conceal the storm inside her.

She doesn’t have to be Queen to have power.

Dawn comes red as roses the next morning. Gwen doesn’t fear for it—she’s no sailor and red has always suited her. Today is the final. Much to Uther’s chagrin, her and Lancelot have swept Camelot’s Knights and have each earned the chance to face down Prince Arthur himself. Gwen never intended to make it past the first round, but now that she’s here she’s damn well going to make a good showing. She wears Hollace’s yellow sash and Morgana’s red ribbon and something in her sings at the inexplicable magnificence of this moment.

Lancelot is on first. He has a bit of nerves, and they both arrive ridiculously early, and Arthur is young and egotistical and naturally will be late, so the practice match between them is inevitable, really. Citizens of all walks of life are slowly filing into the stands as Gwen raises her blade in time with Lancelot.

“I’ve been watching your matches closely,” Lancelot says.

“Close enough for an even spar?” Gwen replies.

He twinkles mischievously.

The resulting first exchange amply shows that Lancelot has learned how to dance. There’s no force in their swings as they twirl around the ring, making their moves as needlessly showy as they like. Gwen can almost hear the music. Even when the intensity picks up and sacrifices rhythm, they still more resemble two overexcited dogs playing tug-o-war than deathly enemies.

Lancelot is a much different fighter now than he was at any point Gwen knew him. He doesn’t have the cutting desperation of fighting for his life and someone else’s entertainment, or the staid experience from his time as a Knight. But like Gwen, he has grown in ways that couldn’t be accounted for instead, adopting parts of her own fluidity, a sense of practicality from humble but vicious fights against more monsters than men, and a sort of untarnished love of the sport that carries far. They’re much more evenly matched now than when they first started training together

and much better suited to each other's styles, both because they spar regularly and because they both accommodate the same certain ticks, like magical intervention via Merlin.

Gwen is just winding Lancelot up in one of his own forms when a trumpet blows, heralding the arrival of the crown. She makes to flee their very unauthorized demonstration but Lancelot catches her by the wrist and holds up their hands, and they bow to a full audience shouting and waving and chanting.

Lancelot is first up. Gwen shuffles behind the boards and watches Arthur march out onto the field, faithful red cape snapping in the breeze. He keeps his face aloof and regal, but from the way he unsheathes his sword alone Gwen can tell that he's all too eager for the chance to beat Lancelot. And really, how he's still in a twist about one benign misunderstanding says a lot.

Lancelot has been broken of his nerves, warm and dewy and loose from the spar. He slides on his helmet but Gwen can still tell he's smiling, thrilled to be testing his meddle in the most official forum available. He could get a knighthood out of this fight. He will, if Gwen has anything to do with it.

They clash with all the brilliance two grand warriors of honor can offer. It goes to show that everyone who steps in that ring has something to prove; even the Prince himself, who dives at Lancelot as earnestly as he would in the heat of battle. Gwen's pride surges as Lancelot uses one of her own moves to slip out of range, flipping the hilt of his sword in his grip and swinging back handed as he passes. There's no way to block it, and Arthur is forced to duck basely into the dirt. He has the raw muscle to push himself up again though, carrying the momentum into an upwards parry. Lancelot's swing is unsettled in his hand from where he's just righted the orientation of the sword, and he gets batted aside. Lance steps back with the toe of his sword forward, and this time when their blades meet the connection is solid.

At that moment Gwen can see the smile in both of them. It's in the shoulders.

Lancelot takes the offensive for a bit, lining up conserved but rapid-fire blows that force Arthur back a good five paces. Arthur digs in and hits hard, and it goes on. Lancelot's original first match with Arthur lasted barely a minute. This one is passing two…

Three…

Four…

Arthur hammers his sword into Lancelot's side and he goes tumbling down.

Lancelot doffs his helmet and waves to the crowd, beaming. Arthur seems perplexed as to how he can possibly happy when he's just been beaten into the dirt, but there must be something more measured growing in him because he extends his hand to help Lancelot up. Lance takes it, and they bow to thunderous applause.

As the two exit the ring Merlin shoulders his way to the gate, and even from a distance it is painfully obvious how Arthur straightens and preens. Merlin bolts right past the Prince and slaps Lance on the shoulders, saying something enthusiastic Gwen can't hear. Arthur looks like murder.

Once he's released, Lancelot, out of breath and shiny with sweat, comes to stand beside Gwen on the sidelines. She clasps hands with him, having a moment of realization that the reason Knights do that is that you simply can't hug in full armor. A page brings him water and he chokes himself a little trying to get it all down at once. They idle in silence as the crowd resets itself.

Gwen is called onto the field and she stands with the iron in her bones her father forged, tempered in her own fire, ready for her last dance with her husband.

Arthur's countenance towards her is even stormier towards her than towards Lancelot, possibly by cumulative effect. He tosses his hair and settles into an open stance, practically sending her a formal invitation to swing at him. But the thing is, Gwen knows she can't out-fight Arthur on an even playing field. However, she *can* outthink him. She draws her sword in one smooth move and points her directly forward, arm just short of fully extended in a line from shoulder to tip pointing directly at him.

If you want it so bad, come and get it.

Arthur colours and takes the bait, lunging forward with a swoop of the blade that she catches easily but modestly. She pokes vaguely at his knees and lets his swipe guide her into a liquid block against his retaliation, taking a healthy step back. She takes the next step back, and the next.

Men affix such importance to *losing ground.* Outside of a military campaign the only significance it holds is whether it brings you closer to getting cornered, and there's no corners in a ring. Gwen falls aback and back and watches Arthur's ego take control, making him showy and confident and *sloppy*.

In a moment of particular genius, she angles her block so that Arthur ends up slamming down on the flat of her blade, and while it nearly costs Gwen her hold it's worth it for the underestimation factor. This Arthur has never had to question the merit of commoners at length—it's yet another item on her to do list. Showing any kind of lack of mastery will play right into what he already believes about a no-name knight errant from the hills. For the sake of balance she slaps his blade down and gets a foot on the toe, sliding her own up his shoulder so he has to twist aside of lose his helmet. He pulls the sword out and she brings the destabilized foot back and out, back in defensive position.

Gwen keeps steady, raising her sword steadily in front of her face. She angles it and the glare skitters across Arthur's armor. Reflected in the face of the blade is the royal box seats.

She renews the power in her swings, hitting nasty and fast and hard. Arthur meets her blow for blow, no art or skill, only enough elbow room to make the same high swing again and again. His brawn pushes her back the final three steps until she's flat against the boards. They crash steel together in one even cross that rings across the field loud enough to rattle bones, and Gwen turns her blade level and up as she springs her free arm over Arthur's sword, twisting her forearm backwards and around so she has the blade locked under her armpit, spinning them about and slamming her the sword into the boards next to his head. Despite being dulled it sinks straight through, inches from the King's knees.

Arthur looks at her with wide, baffled eyes. She feels an unstoppable smile spreading on her face, and speaks.

"Yield."

His surprise turns to full out shock, mouth falling open dumbly. Gwen gives his sword a jerk and reminds him exactly where he is, and he shakes his head like a wet dog.

"I yield!"

Uther shouts something wrathful but it's drowned by a wall of noise that makes Gwen think that she might never hear again. Arthur is saying something but she can't read his lips, and the only

sound is like ocean waves, crashing and warping and filling her head to toe with lightning, and it doesn't matter anymore what he has to say about her. There is nothing in the world that can hold her back, because all this time wound and unwound she has made her own power and by rights there is no one who can take it away. The moment stops and shines and she knows exactly what it's for.

She reaches up and frees her head of her helmet. Morgana's eyes lock with hers and Gwen smiles, blind and deaf to the wildfire of live chaos that surges on around them.

"No one else. You are like no one else."

All the way to the tavern, Merlin and Lancelot are hanging off her shoulders and saying wonderful things and she's just thinking *I'm going to do it.*

I'm going to tell Morgana I love her.

It's so obvious. Her chapter with Arthur closed a long time ago, and she's done pretending she has it in her to soullessly use him for status, and Morgana is using her magic and the world isn't ending, and Gwen is going to tell her she loves her. It's simple as wildflowers.

They'll have to deal with the whole Britomart aspect but Gwen isn't afraid of it. The crowd was downright riotous, and Merlin and Lancelot had closed her in like clamshells and escorted her away as quickly as possible, but it seemed like a good kind of riot. She had spotted a group of girls with braided hair jumping the boards, and that was enough to keep her standing tall through anything.

Still, a mild evening would be lovely, and going into the tavern she puts up her hood. They settle in with her favorite cider and raise a toast.

"To Britomart!" Merlin shouts.

"To Britomart!"

There's an answering cheer from around the room, flagons of ale raising and sloshing. The bard who seems to be a permanent fixture picks up the thread, and Gwen kicks her feet as she listens for his latest revisions.

She stills.

Lancelot's knuckles are white around his drink. The bar is quiet, choking on its own sticky air, but the bard doesn't seem to notice, warbling on and on. Gwen's throat burns and her stomach is turning and she feels all the worse knowing that it gets to her at all, but it's just—

Lancelot pushes up from his chair at the same time as a voice comes from the bar. "Mate, you'd be wise to shut the fuck up about Britomart."

Gwen's brain blanks out for a second from the mismatched context, then turns and throws off her hood. "Gwaine?!"

Lovely, wonderful Gwaine blinks once and grins, confused but not fussed about it. "Pardon me Lady Brit, there's some faces in need of breaking."

Apparently nature sets itself to rights no matter what, because their first meeting with Gwaine is in a bar fight.

“Free chance to humiliate the nobility around here, fuck, I’ll take that,” Gwaine explains succinctly. Gwen hadn’t noticed his name in the roster, but it’s not like she was the secretary. She taps her bundle of wildflowers against her leg thoughtfully. Maybe she should be checking it later…

“I would like to say again, the tournament was all my idea,” Merlin says, again.

Gwaine snorts. “And how do you know about me? I didn’t fight *that* well.”

They’ve been walking steadily castle-ward since Gwaine was bodily tossed out of the tavern, and have now come up to the gates, which loom large in the dusk. Gwen sighs. “That’s a six-hundred page story.”

“You seem like a fun crowd, don’t ruin it by making me read,” Gwaine replies.

Gwen smiles and rushes a few paces ahead, eager to be home. Just this once she can probably foist explanations onto Merlin and get back to her Lady’s side at a reasonable hour. And the wildflowers should go in water sooner rather than later—

Hand close around her arms on either side.

“Gwen Smith, you are hereby charged with the high crime of Sorcery.”

Chapter End Notes

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The Fuck Destiny Book Club for Sorcery and High Treason

Chapter Notes

> I'm not dead!! just went on a road trip and got a job. But now we're back at it and its hotting up folks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Morgana learned she had the capacity for murder in her, she had thought it made sense. Even if she couldn't fathom the reality of it, it was the logical reflection of the insidious fear she had been carrying for so long, that something evil was growing inside her. But when she finally began to let her magic light her veins, it was warm and fierce and glowing, as full of love as she was, and the fear of it began to burn off like so much oil. Thus the last inhibitions against her convictions fell away. In the last shy month she had grown more and more steady in the knowledge that if she wasn't inherently wicked, it wasn't like she was going to trip and stumble into killing human beings. Whatever circumstances had driven her to it before, she couldn't possibly understand what it took to become a killer.

Gwen is in the dungeons awaiting a rigged trial for her life.

Morgana understands now.

"Don't," Gwen implores, though Morgana hadn't said anything at all. It's dangerous to reside in a castle when regicide reads that plainly on your face.

Morgana keeps her expression placid as a stone. "It would be the simplest solution to all of this." Not just saving Gwen's life, but the ones after Gwen. Freeing Camelot once and for all.

Gwen holds her hands palm up and Morgana takes them instantly, reaching through the bars to feel the reassurance of her warmth. A guard looks like he might take exception, and Morgana briefly passes her gaze over him with all the acid rage she's feeling beneath the surface. He looks away down the hall politely. When she looks back Gwen has a tired smile blooming on her face, and closes her eyes and leans her forehead against the bars, and it's a kind of theft but Morgana mirrors the gesture.

"Don't go away from me like that. I told you, I need you here with me," Gwen murmurs.

"What good is it that I am here with you if I can't do anything to save you!" Morgana hisses.

"I'll be fine, eventually, somehow. It's not important now—we're still on a *schedule*, my Lady. You're needed elsewhere."

"Oh, damn them all. Arthur can fend for himself this once."

"Morgana," Gwen says, and the lack of a title makes her quiet. "Please. My father."

Morgana doesn't know whether to laugh or scream. She understands what Gwen is trying to remind her of now—the next disaster listed in Merlin's almanac isn't something she can neglect. This is the week Tom Smith would be framed for sorcery by the sorcerer Tauren.

There isn't time for elaborate schemes where everything is accounted for and nothing is lost. She's hemorrhaging time just standing here. She's playing jacks with Gwen's life, Tom Smith's, and her own soul. There won't be time for all of them.

Morgana resolves to make a deal with the devil.

After months of refining her control over her dreams, tonight Morgana lets her natural scrying run wild. She lets her power flood the astral plane like a tidal wave, announcing herself more clearly than a troupe of heralds, relaying a single name.

Nimueh.

Morgana can sense the faintest outline of the connections firing down the line, the name appearing unbidden in the minds of scryers up and down the land as she pushes further into the wilds. It must reach someone who knows of the witch, because the knowledge of her seeps up like water, and from there Morgana can follow it back to the Valley of Fallen Kings. Through the mist, through the rushes and eddies of dark water. A decaying castle, slowly being retaken by nature. An altar that knows blood.

Nimueh materializes from the shadows in her shredded finery and looks Morgana dead in the eye. An uncanny experience when you're not actually there.

"What an unexpected honor," Nimueh says. "Uther's cuckoo."

Morgana blinks serenely. "High Priestess Nimueh. I have an opportunity for you."

"Oh?"

"Three days from now there will be a witch trial. If you were to come for Uther then… you would meet very little resistance."

Nimueh's eyes gleam with amusement. "Why should I play along with *you*?"

"Because we're the same."

Nimueh chuckles incredulously, interested now. "How do you figure that?"

"People think you're a monster but you're just a ghost. A shade of a slaughter that refuses to stay buried, frozen in time and never aging…even wearing the same clothes. You're kept here for one purpose but you don't know if you remember what it is, except that it's an answer that can only be written in my father's blood. If they kill the woman they want to kill this week the truly living parts of me will die with her, and your window will have closed because I will be Camelot's ghost, then. Your haunts will become mine and I will subsume you, until the pain of the next battered girl can consume what's left of us both. So you'd better end it quick. What doesn't happen now will be your fate forever."

Nimueh has drawn the shadows up around her, and looks at Morgana now with a hatred so ancient she can't be offended by it any more than the shape of the mountains. "The instant you master the power of life and death you *will* inherit my seat. The old religion won't ask to take you. You know this."

"I do."

Nimueh doesn't reply. She melts into the shadows like spilled wine, and around her the colors lose concentration, and the shapes their specificity, until Morgana's mind is adrift in a white sea.

In the moment between sleep and wakefulness, she hears a whistle of a cuckoo.

Arthur is the crown prince and is not frightened of his father's ward, ever, but the last two days he has ample cause to be uneasy. He expects her to lash out: to howl and kick and get herself thrown below right next to Gwen. Instead she is utterly silent, which is somehow much worse.

It has been a trying forty-eight hours.

In a simpler world he could have been embarrassed for being so thoroughly thrashed by a girl in front of half the kingdom, but he can only wish that his worries were that petty. Gwen is in the dungeons awaiting execution and on some level it's his fault, which makes it his responsibility. But there was only so much he could say to his father.

At the time, he had insisted—"just because she beat me doesn't mean she used sorcery."

Uther's exact words were—"A woman taking a man's role; it's a perversion of nature. Anyone can see clearly the witch is dealing in unnatural forces from that alone."

It set something hidden in him on fire, ugly and brilliant, and it burns even now.

"And what was your reply?" Merlin asks. The way he asks, Arthur feels like he's being tested without his knowledge. He's carrying that accursed book again, and what there could possibly be in books to help them Arthur can't imagine. He's made it a long term goal to steal it just to find out what could be so bloody important, but he's never succeeded in doing anything other than freaking Merlin out, which was amusing but inconclusive.

"What could I say? I told him Guinevere has no magic."

From Merlin's face, he's failed the test.

"You could have told him she doesn't deserve to die regardless. You could have told the truth, that she's kind and loyal and hates to hurt what she can't help. Because then at least you would have been defending her in earnest—Gwen does have magic. Not like me, but latent under her skin."

"Why does it matter? Can't you just magic her out of there?" Arthur bites. The panic and frustration is choking; why can't people stop telling him things that make his life harder? He doesn't want to have to think about it. That's worked for the first twenty-one years of his life, so why have the questions and moral quandaries and painful truths chosen to come knocking now?

"If you want to prove the charges against her so she can never return to Camelot, *sure* Arthur! If it were me—" And isn't that the thought he's been avoiding this whole time. Arthur could vomit. "—that would be expected, I wagered that to be here. But Gwen has done nothing wrong! Oh my god, Morgana was right. She was right about everything."

Never in his life has Arthur found that to be a statement precluding good fortune. "What does that *mean*?"

"It was fine when it was just me, to protect you. But it was never just me. How many other Gwens?" Merlin's eyes begin to sizzle with gold, and the air seems to crack like lightning that hasn't found a ground point. Something isn't right. "Years of it. Was I just *numb*? Did it not matter anymore? How much blood—" To Arthur's utmost horror, as soon as Merlin says it he can see lines of garnet-red seeping up between the stones under his shoes, and it traces the mortar like it's familiar. Like it knows how to be spilled upon this ground. Like it has been here before. Merlin is

looking somewhere beyond him now, eyes blazing bright in the firelit dim. “There’s too many. They’re so loud, why did I ever ignore them--”

Arthur pushes through the preternatural sense of horror hammering on his temples and stumbles forward to clutch the sides of Merlin’s face. Staring into his eyes is like staring at the sun, but he does it anyways in a plea for any kind of recognition. “*Merlin!*”

He’s granted his wish—the light in Merlin’s eyes is clouded over with confusion, which gives way to familiarity. Merlin’s own hands are gripping his sleeves, and the sorcerer’s face falls almost imperceptibly. He mumbles hollowly under his heavy breathing. “Right. That’s why.”

“Merlin,” Arthur repeats, because he genuinely doesn’t know anything else to say.

Merlin draws back all at once, physically and emotionally closing down as he scrubs his hands over his face. “What time is it? I’m late for a thing. I have to—I’ve got to go.”

“No you don’t—we’re still talking!”

Merlin gives him a look more cutting than he was prepared for. “No, you’re sitting here alone in your room until you can decide whether or not you can oppose your father in any way that matters.” Arthur doesn’t want to think about what his face looks like, because Merlin softens. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“One would hope, seeing as *that’s your job*!” Arthur shouts at an already closing door.

Sitting alone in his room. If there was any chance of that, it evaporated the moment Merlin commanded it.

Arthur is quickly catching sympathy for Gwen’s silent trials to disguise herself, because he looks stupid. It’s not like he had a choice. He was sure he had minutes at the most before Merlin disappeared entirely, so he had simply grabbed the first vaguely obfuscating garments he could find. In exchange for this gambit he was now wandering the lower town in an out of season traveling cloak with a sheer green scarf he could only assume was Morgana’s tied over his nose and mouth. It couldn’t have been a more obvious disguise if he had stolen Gaius’ spectacles and painted on a moustache.

The night goers of the lower town hardly seem to mind. The agreed upon sense of courtesy in this atmosphere seems to be to keep your eyes down, and he’s glad for it, even if he himself wants to stare at the strange goings-on. That transaction between that produce vendor and that traveler didn’t seem strictly legal.

Following Merlin is worryingly easy. The man traipses about like discretion is an undiscovered sin, as Arthur knows well enough from hunting with him. It’s still a mystery where he’s going, and what possible business he could have in the seedier sections of Camelot in the dead of night, and why he’s carrying that damned book again, but at least Arthur needn’t fear losing his trail.

As is typical of fate’s favor, at that moment Arthur loses his trail.

Arthur could swear Merlin turned here, but the side street is empty and disturbingly quiet. Not a soul passes him as he turns off to try and find him again. Something about this empty street raises the hair on his neck, but not necessarily out of fear. Just...something. Potential, or significance. The quiet lowers his guard—which is why he almost leaps out of his boots when a purple lantern rises out of the cobblestones like a ghost.

After the first a row of the ghost lanterns float up in quick succession down the lane, neat as soldiers, casting the whole street in a warm purple glow and unmistakably beckoning him forward. Arthur stares. This sort of thing one could explain away questing in the heart of the wilds, but this was still deep in Camelot's sprawl. They look delicate, made with artistry and attention, too utterly fantastic for their surroundings. Blame that for why Arthur finds himself a little bit enraptured.

He's being invited. It would be rude to ignore them.

It sends his heart rabbiting even to think it. He can hear his father shouting *no* as clearly as if the man is standing right beside him. But there's no one around, and he's swaddled in his silly disguise, and he's already come this far. More treason it is.

The lanterns bob encouragingly as he passes, leading him up to a nondescript door with a generic sign:

HOLLACE TAILOR

TAILOR

And a healthy sprig of hawthorn nailed over the doorframe. The second he steps within five feet of the door, a slot he's pretty sure wasn't there before pulls back to reveal a set of aged brown eyes.

"You haven't been round here," drones the absurdly creaky voice. It's not a question, and Arthur's cut off before he can think through how to reply. "Not a problem round here. Good stuff, good stuff. Hollace likes to see some new blood around here."

Without ceremony the door flings open unassisted and an ancient man with eyes glowing gold yanks him inside like a sack of flour. Arthur would be very cross with this presumptuous old man except he's too busy collecting his jaw from its recent acquaintance with the floor.

The room is on some level recognizable as a tailor shop: upright stands for bolts of fabric have been pushed to the far corners, and a few dress forms are cluttered in a doorframe. But the enormous work table has been appropriated as a baffling hybrid between an open bar and a stage for parlor tricks of the extremely illegal variety. Two women, one young and one old, are playing a card game that involves most of the deck floating and the rest damn near weaponized, and a dashing ruffian is failing to stay balanced on his stool while he tries to impress the man of letters to his right with ribald drawings in embers. Someone's drink is on fire. The fire is green. Others chat idly as twinkling lights swirl lazily around the ceiling, And an ornate but tarnished standing harp is playing without a player. As he stares the cluster of dress forms shudder and scatter from the door, shuffling from side to side on their iron feet to the effect of a dull drumroll. The door swings wide to admit a sharply dressed woman who, from her in-control demeanor alone, must be Hollace. She barely spares him a glance as she passes.

"Your first time?"

Arthur tries to hide his startling by straightening his cloak. A country-looking man about his age has suddenly appeared at his shoulder, and from his smirk it didn't work.

"Easy, we're all friends here." He waits a beat like Arthur's silence is an acceptable substitute for conversation. "People are always jumpy the first time they come round, but you seem especially… green," he teases, indicating to the scarf. "How did you get here? Did someone tell you, or was it the lamps?"

Arthur hesitates, breathing in air so thick with magic he could practically taste it. "…the lamps," he

mutters.

“Gorgeous aren’t they?” again, “Courtesy of our Lady.”

“Your Lady?” Arthur queries, attention piqued.

“Our benefactor at court. My, your face. The King really did a number on you.” Arthur panics briefly before he realizes the man is speaking in the general, cultural sense. “Whatever he tries to say, the gift visits us all equally, from the highest towers to the lowest slums. It’s no indication of character,” the man says gently. “You needn’t be so afraid of yourself.”

He’s clearly trying to comfort Arthur, but that fact itself only serves to unbalance him. The prince wonders idly why he’s let this man linger for so long. In the remotest sense he catalogues the dark hair and rambling nature and decides to not think about it at all, actually. He nods curtly to the stranger and tries to disappear against the back wall.

Someone offers him a drink and he’s too dumbfounded to do anything but take it. The tankard promptly lights itself on fire and extinguishes itself before he can react, but he cautiously sips it anyways. In for a penny, in for a pound. It’s very good mead, at least. He leans against the wall in a poor attempt at nonchalance and tries not to look like this is all the strangest thing he’s ever laid eyes on.

Strange, but—kind of beautiful. The eddying lights above give the faint impression of standing underwater, while fits of sparks and floating objects fly through the air at intervals, though no one so much as turns their head. Some of the people carry themselves as if it’s all utterly normal, like they were walking through the Sunday market in the heart of the day. Others seem intoxicated with more than the drink, giddy with the magic weaving through their fingers, using it theatrically and impractically often. A thoroughly drunk young maiden stumbles up to him and pushes a spinning top into his hands, insisting that he should try it. He cautiously sets its point against the great table and spins, and it lights up like it was set with every precious jewel known to man. She laughs uproariously and turns to some other distraction, and he’s left with the top, which he stops gently and rolls back and forth in one hand.

To his left, the old woman who had been playing cards leans over to peer at the toy. “That Bryn. She loves the flashy ones.”

Arthur’s still looking at the top. It’s common cherrywood, plainly carved. Nothing to hint it could be capable of such splendor. “Why’d she leave it?” he wonders aloud.

The old woman winks at him. “The magic of this place has nothing to do with the sorcery.”

He’s about to ask what that means when there’s a loud crash from somewhere across the room, followed by a calamity of bangs and shouting. Everyone in the room is on their feet in an instant, clearing away from the door to a backroom which swings wide as an unknown sorcerer bursts through, pursued by—

Arthur slams down his mead, reaching for a sword that isn’t there.

Only one of them Arthur doesn’t recognize, some swoony looking fellow waving a sword with a suspicious amount of skill. Rounding to cut the sorcerer off from the other side is Lancelot, because of course he is. The sorcerer ducks his swing and slips around him, landing him directly in front of Merlin, who reaches out and blasts a gout of flame at him. He does something Arthur doesn’t understand to counter and turns to make for the door, only for it to be blocked by Morgana.

He becomes aware of the crackling of the air about the same moment as the mystery quarry, who turns to face a sea of blazing golden eyes.

“My Lady,” the woman who might be Hollace says, hands glittering ominously, “Do we have a problem?”

Morgana’s eyes glow answer and a coil of rope darts forward like a viper, binding the sorcerer’s hands. “I don’t expect we will, actually.”

What.

What?

WHAT?

Merlin makes a swooshy motion with hand and the man levitates arse over elbow, trussed like a prize hog. The four stroll back from whence they came, Lancelot and the stranger sheathing their swords, prey literally in tow. The door to the back room slams and the establishment’s patrons go back to their business as if nothing had happened at all. Could-be-Hollace sighs and pours herself a stiff drink, and he sympathizes, really.

Arthur inconspicuously slides across the room to the closed door, lurking like he’s lurking for general purposes and not eavesdropping. If he listens closely he can hear the barest threads of a conversation.

“…don’t care. It’s not enough.”

It’s Morgana’s voice, thick with upset.

“Morgana…” Merlin murmurs, almost too soft to hear.

Lancelot speaks up when he doesn’t continue. “You don’t believe that.”

“I do, I really do. For what he could have done, he ought to be killed.”

Which about tears it. Arthur shoulders open the door, yanking down the scarf over his face. “What the devil is going on here?!”

Lancelot and the stranger leap up in surprise, and the stranger’s hand doesn’t stray from his sword even at the sight of Arthur’s face. Merlin looks up wide eyed and panicked where he’s crouched beside Morgana over that godforsaken infernal *book*. Morgana turns her tear-stained face up at him and laughs bitterly.

“Welcome to the Fuck Destiny Book Club for sorcery and high treason,” she croaks, “how may we help you?”

Merlin glares at her. There’s a muffled scream from the trussed sorcerer propped against the wall. Morgana sighs heavily. “Gwaine, Lancelot, could you be a dear and take that thing elsewhere.”

‘Gwaine’ gives her a two finger salute. “Glad to. No offense, but this seems like a family affair, highness.” It takes a second for Arthur to realize he’s referring to Morgana.

“You can start explaining any time,” he grumbles.

Lancelot gives him a sheepish nod as they heft the captive out of the room, closing the door behind them. Merlin shuts the book and holds it tight to his chest as he stands, pulling Morgana up with

him. She looks at him with the defiant set of her brow that seems much more familiar than tears, jaw firming. “I’m a sorceress.”

Arthur throws up his hands and tries to project his beleaguered consternation as clearly as he feels it. If people would just stop *telling* him these things.

“I’m a very powerful sorceress and also your half-sister.”

Arthur chokes. “Sure. Fine. Is there anyone else who’s secretly magic that I should know about?” Merlin and Morgana both wince. “What?”

“How did you even find this place?” Morgana asks.

“Your silly lanterns. A bit overkill, isn’t it? Anyone could wander along.”

Morgana squints. “Not really.”

“Morgana,” Merlin says cautiously, “what was the exact literal translation of the words you used?”

“Show thyself to any mortal touched by magic,” she draws out gravely. “And Arthur was born of magic.”

Arthur laughs frantically. “Um, no.”

“Gwen always did this so much smoother,” Merlin mutters.

A foreign and frightening intensity suddenly rises in Morgana’s eyes. “Well she’s not here, is she?” she hisses.

“Go back to the part where you’re my sister,” he baits. Arthur doesn’t like this strange edge to her, and a little false bravado never hurt anyone. “Should have known, I guess. Who else but a sibling could hope to annoy me half as much as you do?”

She glares at him but there’s no heat. “Brother dear, you have no idea. It doesn’t end there, I’m afraid. IN all our time you must have felt how this city is built on secrets.”

“No?” Arthur denies. “This is Camelot, not the fae wilds. It’s a normal city.” The two stare at him, and each other, and him. Morgana reaches for the book and Merlin yelps like a kicked puppy and holds it closer to himself. “And what *is* that thing?!”

Merlin yells “nothing!” at the same time as Morgana says “the truth.” Which is an interesting combination. The pair seem to be having an intense argument silently and right in front of him. He wonders briefly if they can communicate with their thoughts or some such, but Merlin speaks up.

“No. No, no, absolutely no way.”

“He’s going to have to read it sooner or later. Think of it like getting in cold water, all at once.”

“So you admit it’s going to go poorly!” Merlin cries hysterically.

“No! Just, he’ll only make it harder if you don’t.”

Arthur raises his voice. “He’s right here.”

“Arthur,” Morgana starts, “This is a diary—”

“Shut up shut up oh my god shut up—”

“A diary?” Arthur says with barely contained glee.

“—of Merlin’s life, as he would have lived it, if not for the intervention of our Gwen Smith.”

Arthur’s brain goes in two directions at once—one stuck on the tenderness she had imbued with the small word ‘our’, and one grappling with what the hell ‘life as he would have lived it’ means.

“Fine!” Merlin huffs. “Fine. I’ll read the *appropriate sections* out loud so we don’t have to wade through this convolution *again*. Just stop describing things.” He sits down aggressively and snaps open the book. “Foreword: a letter to and from the author. Hello, I’m you! Nice to meet me. This is not the strangest thing that will happen to you in Camelot…”

Arthur’s head is going to explode.

To review, Gwen is a time traveler, Morgana is a religious conversion and one bad day away from regicide/patricide, Lancelot and the other one are his future blood brothers, Merlin is the savior of magic-kind, and Arthur is a future unifier of nations and also corpse. Marvelous.

Strangely, it’s not his too-short life he’s stuck on, especially when Merlin seems to be more adamant that he will keep Arthur alive than he has been about anything as long as Arthur’s known him. Which—the absurd thing is, they haven’t even known each other that long, in the grand scheme of things. Not that such a concept can really apply to them when they’ve already volunteered to die for each other multiple times in the first handful of months. When Merlin has held him in his arms as he died. Hasn’t. Will. Could. Won’t. It’s something like reincarnation.

No, it’s knowing what his father did to conceive him that is burning a hole in his head. He thinks hollowly that anyone would find that information traumatizing, but the joke falls flat even in his own head. There’s magic in his own body. Magic made his body. His kneejerk reaction is terror at what his father would think, but then he comes to remember that his father already knows. His father knows that there’s benign magic in Arthur, because he literally put it there. And he will murder Gwen for the same thing.

The rage this stokes is different, twisted and uncomfortable like a tree grown sideways to get out from under a boulder. It feels untamed and alien but powerful, like it could burn out fear and push him forward into action. He feels this way towards Uther, and that’s scary but also liberating, and he thinks…

He thinks that if he’s a little magic, he’s glad it makes him like his sister and not his father.

Arthur is brooding on all this in the safety of his own room when a crisp knock comes at the door. He recognizes it as Morgana even before he answers, but puts on a show of bafflement all the same. She smiles, brushing past him into his chambers, and pulls a parcel out from under her shawl. It’s tantalizingly book-shaped.

“Is that—”

“Yes.”

“How—”

“Flagrant betrayal of trust for the greater good.”

Arthur folds his arms to stop himself from grabbing at it like a child. “What greater good?”

Morgana sighs, but it’s more wistful than pained. “I have put in motion the necessary parts so that Gwen will be safe. Someone—someone ought to be happy today. That and pure personal gain.”

She unwraps the book and presents it to him with both hands. He’s certainly not going to refuse it.

Chapter 3.5: Arthur, pages 340-341

There are three rules.

1. Don’t let your enemies see it. I cannot emphasize how monstrously bad it would be if they used him as leverage on purpose. It is by far bad enough when they do it on accident. The things that I’ve done and the things that have been done to me do not bear repeating.
2. Don’t torture yourself with it. Don’t! Don’t look too much or stand too close or get your bloody hopes up. Don’t imagine it for any length of time. You’re not listening, are you.
3. Don’t begrudge the women. Try to remember that you’re all on the same unfortunate team. They didn’t do anything wrong and blaming them is unkind and unfair. This goes double, triply so for Gwen, who is a gift to this world and you will under no circumstances hurt her. They really deserve each other, you know. Or really Gwen probably deserves better, but believe it or not I did help them together for a reason other than so that I could let Gwen say the words I couldn’t.

Thinking of saying something dangerous? Try these instead:

“You’re a great man”

“*Gwen* loves you”

“You’re a prat”

“I’ll always be by your side”

“*Camelot* needs you”

“I trust you with my life”

“You’re a royal prat”

Or nothing at all.

Conclusion

You look at him and you wonder when it’s going to end. It never did, not even in death.

He’s awful, isn’t he? An arrogant boor who can’t see past his nose and still has the gall to be all golden and chiseled but soft when it counts. Life would be so much easier if he was just purely terrible, but even when he’s being terrible it can’t hide the raw decency of his soul. So fate’s cruel hand is that he’ll have you running to the four corners of the earth for his convenience and you’ll do it with a smile. He’s an exhausting man to *(something struck out)*

There was a time when we were lost in a cave, stumbling around blind and trying not to get killed, as is par for the course, and after almost breaking his ankle on a gap in the path Arthur told me to jump. Before I really thought about it I literally asked how high. We just sort of stared at each other

for a bit.

The fact that after everything he put me through he had the audacity to die first sometimes makes me so angry that I consider going into necromancy just to be able to give him a piece of my mind, fully an honestly, for once in my life. However this feeling usually precedes a crushing bout of grief that shuts me up in my chambers for days on end, so I can't even claim that bit of righteousness. No one ever called me a prideful man, and I've never cared for appearances. Still, please keep Arthur alive if nothing else to save us from the insult of all the humiliation and blood and tears being for nothing.

Please keep Arthur alive.

I can't wait to be you so I can see his face again. I can't wait to have all these heavy years to scrubbed from my mind. There's Camelot, and the greater good, but you must already know it was mostly selfish. I want to go back to the sweeter torture—standing beside the man forgotten gods promised me was my other half, with my words locked in my mouth.

And in this book. Ha.

This is the part where I'm supposed to have a plan or at least conjecture what could happen now that you have the chance to do things differently. I've considered every aspect of the future to be that my foreknowledge could possibly assist, ceaselessly, relentlessly. I even have some preliminary thoughts on the Uther problem, unpleasant as it is. But in this space there will be nothing written.

I have tried to offer a solution to every conceivable problem you could encounter—

"There is no solution for loving Arthur Pendragon."

The book closes with a soft snap and Arthur smirks from his place leaning against the frame of his bedroom window. When enough presence of mind returns to Merlin for conscious thought, he thinks he ought to push the prince out of it.

"You *bastard*." Arthur's face goes blank with surprise, but Merlin can't be stopped now that he's started. "How can you be so needlessly cruel? I kept one thing—one thing!—for myself, and you have to pillage and plunder even that—for what? So you can humiliate me for your own entertainment? Again?! God, Gwen was right, I have no self-respect—"

"Merlin!" Arthur cuts in. "I'm not trying to humiliate you!"

"Great job so far!" Merlin yells hysterically.

Arthur takes a step forward and merlin takes a step back. "You're crying."

Merlin scrubs his sleeve over his face aggressively, face burning. "This is incidental! This is not because of you!"

"Merlin, can't you see that I—" Arthur stops, jaw clenched and throat bobbing. "Oh, damn it all to hell."

Arthur surges forward and catches Merlin by the shoulders, pressing a kiss onto his lips.

Logically, this is what happens. Half of Merlin's brain is trying to reconcile this information and

failing pretty badly. The other half is busy enthusiastically reciprocating. Arthur is a good kisser because of course he is, he has to be perfect at everything. His stupid plush lips are as soft as Merlin ever imagined. Merlin absolutely does not know where to put his hands, but hell, there's no bad answers.

They break apart and Arthur lingers in his space like he can't bear to be that much farther. Merlin blinks and blinks and kisses Arthur some more and blinks. Arthur smiles. "Am I really so terrible?"

And it's a set-up, a hook so Merlin can say *oh the worst* and they can both laugh. He doesn't. "No. You're always trying to be better for the people around you. It's what I…" Merlin's eyes skitter away briefly before he screws up his courage and meets his gaze, raising his chin. "It's what I love about you."

Arthur looks at him with the most devastated wonderment. It's something Merlin's noticed about him; Arthur is loud and brash when he's surefooted, but when he's overwhelmed or caught out of his depth it's like his voice was stolen from him. Against his better judgement, Merlin feels the hesitation in his core. In another time, after their first kiss Arthur had rejected *Gwen* for her status. How can Merlin feel sure of anything?

"This won't make things any easier," he says, because he's just that much of a masochist.

"I know," Arthur mutters into his shoulder.

"I'm still a servant. And a sorcerer. And a man. Basically I'm your father's worst nightmare."

Arthur raises his face, letting Merlin see the emotions that always read too clearly in his eyes. "I don't care."

Now it was Merlin's turn to be stunned speechless. He crashes their mouths together again because there hasn't been enough of that, and they push and pull and lick and nip until they have to part or risk suffocation. Now that the dam has burst and they can finally touch each other without pretense, months and unhappened years of craving are spilling over, like it's a race to catch up.

Arthur chuckles through his panting. "Three cheers for King Arthur, unifier of Albion, champion of witchcraft and buggery."

Merlin laughs and grasps the sides of Arthur's head. "huzzah, huzzah, huzzah!" he cries, punctuating each huzzah with a kiss on the face.

He doesn't know what Morgana is planning, or how they'll deal with this whole development logistically, or a million other uncontrollable variables in the weave of time. But he does know that he and Arthur are standing together with the last of the secrets and the unsaid things separating them broken down into insignificant rubble. He doesn't think there's anything alive that could stop them now.

Chapter End Notes

In exchange for waiting almost a month for this chapter, you get merthur

Judgement

Chapter Notes

> this one gets dark ngl, tw for Uther's canonical genocide and the trappings that come with it, including child death and a lot of blood. If you want to skip I'll tl;dr at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning Gwen will be sentenced to death, the wind is in the South—Notus, bringer of autumn storms and destroyer of crops. How fortuitous.

Gwen keeps an even head. Morgana stayed with her last night until she was basically sleeping standing up and would have kept on if Gwen hadn't sent her away, and Merlin came even later after that, subtly pushing yet another protective charm into her hands. They tell her there's a plan—though Morgana won't tell her what it is and Merlin doesn't seem to know. She just hopes it's a good one, with minimal collateral damage.

She hasn't exactly been sleeping. Gwen rises with the dawn, always has, ever since she was a little girl helping her father stoke the forge in the small hours of the morning. It hasn't been helping when she can't bring herself to close her eyes until deep in the night. The lack of sleep only intensifies her stiff back and the crick in her neck from sleeping on hay, and her dress is cold and damp from the early morning chill creeping in from the cold stone walls. The walls sweat dew, and it melts the ancient grime into a paste that will stain if you touch it. She knows this now.

Small blessings that it's a short stay. Not so much for those who are tasked with proving of their innocence in that short window, but at least for Gwen in this one subjective moment. Three days for the trinity, and then trial and execution. It's an efficient business, refined by long use.

A guard shackles her hands and feet so dispassionately it seems he's barely there, and she's led up from the dungeons through the same halls she knows backwards and blindfolded, in the castle that is by rights her own home. Her chains rasp against the floor unpleasantly, and chafe against the tender insides of her wrists. The guards don't make eye contact but it's not avoidance; they aren't in the practice of seeing sorcerers as human beings. It's demeaning and alienating and it's supposed to be.

The doors to the great hall open.

In Uther's Camelot execution is a public spectacle by design, but the trial that precedes it is fairly closed-door. Gwen never saw one, as servants were strongly discouraged from attending. It had been suggested that they were too sympathetic to *common* plights and could be impressed with dangerous notions by the defense, the thought itself a remnant of a bygone era where a defense was actually expected. Under Uther's rule the defending part of a trial was strongly subjugated to the accusing. Actually summoning someone to speak for her would have been the fastest route to a guilty verdict, as in the eyes of the court it proved she had done something to defend. So she didn't. The only advocate she needs will already be in the room, anyways.

The entire Pendragon family is seated on their thrones at the end of the hall. Uther could even look bored, almost imperceptibly tapping his fingers against the arm of his seat. But Gwen had seen enough of him to recognize the barest edge in his posture, betraying the electric hatred that resides

just beneath the surface.

Arthur and Morgana are both sitting bolt upright, pale as ghosts. Morgana meets her eyes and her hands fist in her skirts, knuckles going white. Gwen can't risk moving a muscle on her face, but she holds her gaze until the butt of a guard's poleaxe knocks heavily on the floor.

"The trial of Gwen Smith for the mortal crime of sorcery may begin at the King's word."

In a subdued motion, Uther raises two fingers and looks aside to the nearest guard. "Before we begin, escort the Lady Morgana to her chambers."

Gwen stops breathing.

"No! What is the meaning of this, NO!" Morgana yanks her arm away from a guard who leans to 'help' her up. Gwen knows she can't break now or all will be lost, but that may or may not stop her. Morgana is her only defense—can vouch for a woman's swordsmanship and saw how she earned it by hard work alone—and if she leaves this room—

"You're too close to this to remain impartial, my dear. It's for the best."

Morgana stares at the King openmouthed, eyes red rimmed and wild, stunned silent. It doesn't last. "you BEAST!" she shouts. The guard pulls at her and Gwen is screaming inside, trying her hardest not to shout at them not to touch her like that, but they just drag her away faster. "What king is this, denying friends to the helpless! All you are is a knave in a crown, killing innocents for your own mistakes! You spill blood like you sew bast—"

The door slams shut.

Gwen closes her eyes and counts her heartbeats where she can feel them in her throat. One two three four one two three four. Distantly she registers Arthur trying to intervene, and Uther telling him to shut up. One two three four one two three four. She opens her eyes and stares at the empty throne.

"We may begin," Uther announces.

A man in scholarly dress steps out of the line of armed guards and produces a roll of parchment, which he unrolls ceremoniously as he clears his throat. He reads the exact determination of Gwen's purported crime along with a wandering treatise on the evils of magic that has the King sitting proud. He ends on the open invitation to a mostly empty hall that any witness to the act may speak.

"I myself witnessed the act," Uther pronounces. "As did half of Camelot in her shameful display. She goes about masquerading as a man, attempting to take a place in battle. She is not natural, and it's obvious from her behaviour that she is a sorceress."

He's succinct because he's the King, and that's all he has to say to sign her death warrant. By the silence that follows, everyone understands this. The scholar recites the line asking for any defense from the attendants, and Gwen understands that it's just ceremony—this is the end of the trial. She stares hard at her hands, trying to find one coherent thought.

"I will defend her."

Gwen's head snaps up just in time to watch Arthur stand up from his throne. He has a hardness in his eyes she remembers from many a goodbye before many a campaign and she feels sensation flood back to her dulled nerves. He steps down from the dais and aligns himself with her so undeniably that she suddenly remembers to miss him with the force of a forest fire. Not as a lover,

but as a friend—a best friend. Gwen has a few of those, but it's because they're all so important that it can't be quantified. Her father always said that a marriage tie should also be a friendship bracelet.

Uther looks *baffled*. "What are you doing?"

"Someone has to even the field," Arthur says, and then mutters, "I guess that's me."

Gwen discretely steps on his toe.

Uther glares and glares but says nothing, tongue held by his own laws. Arthur looks at her briefly and smiles wanly before facing that glare head on. "Guinevere is a valued member of this castle, who has been in our employment—in good standing—for over a decade. Morgana has praised her character endlessly, and in my experience Guinevere lives up to that judgement. She's a good woman, kind and honest and unfailingly loyal, and she's not guilty of anything."

Uther squints. "And what of the charges? You saw her behaviour first hand. You can't deny what she did."

"No," Arthur replies cheerily, "but if dressing in armor and beating me silly was a crime, you'd have to burn yourself then, wouldn't you."

"She is a *witch*," Uther grates, vein jumping in his temple.

"No, she is your subject. And the fact of the matter is, there's no one you can claim she's hurt or stollen from. You can't even prove she's used magic."

"Even, EVEN!" Uther roars. "Magic is a crime punishable by death regardless of its use, because it is an abomination before nature! I do not need your moralizing about harm! I can and will sentence this woman to death—"

The minute he speaks the word there comes a roaring like an entire river dropped on their heads. Gwen turns to the door and finds it crumbling away under a gout of flame that reaches to the highest arches of the ceiling, scorching the stone black. In the gaping frame Morgana stands with her hands outstretched, and Merlin at her side.

"*You will do no such thing*!"

Some of the guards immediately break ranks and run. The others form a haphazard charge, but Merlin and Morgana each sweep out an arm and they fall sleeping they stand. They have had the benefit of months of studying all the magic Merlin ever came to know in Gwen's time, and she realizes now just how wild and engulfing their power has become underneath the little charms and lamps. The scholar is drooling on the detailing of charges. Uther stands and draws his sword but even he isn't foolish enough to rush the sorcerers that have downed the majority of the room.

They both rush to her side. Morgana throws her arms around Gwen's neck and Gwen melts into it, holding that feeling and letting it steady her. Merlin has the audacity to wink.

"Sorry I'm late," he whispers. "Had to collect this one."

"Morgana! What is this?!" Uther roars.

"If you're going to burn Gwen for sorcery then you'll have to burn me as well. I'm more a sorcerer than she ever was," Morgana says, and grasps Gwen's hand.

“And me,” Merlin adds as he takes her other one, “Not that you remember who I am, but.”

“This is absurd—”

“And me.” Arthur crosses to Merlin and takes his hand.

Gwen’s heart surges with more love than feels like it should be able to fit in her body. Her friends. Each one has always had force of will to spare, and though in the past that sheer ferocity of spirit had caused friction and strife among them as they chafed under Uther’s legacy, after all the time Gwen has seen elapse, they are finally coming into alignment. For her.

Uther recoils. “Then I’ve raised traitors? Arthur, quit this nonsense. My only son. You are the last drop of Pendragon blood, it cannot go to vipers.”

“Oh, but father dearest, don’t forget your only daughter goes as well,” Morgana says. A look passes between them, some thread of tired commonality that won’t die but depreciates mercilessly nonetheless. “You always looked at me like I was your reckoning. Well, I’ve finally come for your debts.”

Uther is an old man, and in this moment the weathering creeps up on his face. They stand like that for a long moment, a King with a naked blade and too many years on his back, facing the chain of the four of them, fresh and untried and barely more than children, but unbreakable where their hands meet. Gwen thinks he sees the tides changing, sees the coming of an autumn storm.

“You say none of you die, or all of you,” he finally says. He raises his head high and it does not hide the depth of ancient pain. “Then all of you shall die.”

Arthur looks like he’s been physically struck. He turns his face to Morgana, and the greater tragedy is that she is simply resigned. She’s crying, but Gwen doesn’t know if she ever stopped. Merlin squeezes Gwen’s hand as he stares ahead with fire in his eyes, and she wonders blankly where they go from here.

They won’t die. If they wanted to Merlin and Morgana could blow out the windows with a word. She supposes they could all run away, start that farm Arthur was so keen on. She and Merlin would have to teach their pendragon siblings everything about how to actually take care of oneself by oneself, but it would be charming. They could probably drag Lancelot and Gwaine along, and they would be good muscle and better company. Gwen could take up knitting. They could have a vegetable patch. She and Morgana could sit by the hearth drinking chamomile tea and reading poetry.

But what would become of her kingdom?

“You are no children of mine. Nature knew I wasn’t meant to have any children, and it was my mistake defying it. If this how I pay for that mistake, this is how I pay. Better no children than to see the Pendragon line so corrupted. Let the dynasty end clean, with no frayed ends.”

None of them speak a word. Their silence unsettles him better than anything they could say. And what words are there? There are none. Instead—

There comes a whistle of a cuckoo.

The silence deepens and expands like the course of a river, thick with portent, still in the way that makes animals flee with natural premonition of disaster. Four faces lined up like gravestones face him quietly as the birdcall echoes off the stone arches of the ceiling, high and away. Gwen makes the barest turn of her head and looks to Morgana for answers. Her head is high and her eyes are

impossibly sad.

“I did think,” Morgana says, “that we could still part as friends. The part of me that’s still that ten year old girl who has yet to see your face and thought that you could still accept me. Your bastard. But Uther Pendragon, for once in your life, you’re all out of time.

“What is that bird?” Uther commands. “Answer me!”

“You wanted a witch?” Morgana asks, gaze unswerving. “*Well here she comes*!”

Uther barely has the time to look up before all the windows burst in at once, shattered so finely that the shards fly inwards flurries that looks like light embodied, the unmitigated sun flooding and blinding, and with them rushes in the sound of a hundred trumpets and the picking of strings of a hundred harps, and threads of countless other instruments from foreign lands that none of them will ever see. Above them the chandelier blazes to life of its own volition, and its own shadow casts them in a ring drawn in darkness that fixes in place even as the fixture swings on its chain. The sleepers babble in their sleep in forgotten tongues, not as men caught in a nightmare but like half of an urgent conversation, until the babbling turns to names that go on and on and Gwen recognizes none of them, but she feels an instinctive apprehension about why she recognizes none of them. Her eyes are darting in every direction as she tries to see all of it at once, before stopping all at once on something shocking enough to hold them. Uther stands thunderstruck, frozen in the horror of magic, but Gwen looks right past him, to where the High Priestess Nimueh is seated on his throne.

“Uther Pendragon,” she decrees, and the sound carries unnaturally strong. “Welcome to the Reckoning.”

Another surge of horns swells. Uther spooks and turns on the spot, stumbling backwards off the dais. Merlin pulls Arthur away from him protectively, but none of them break the chain, like it’s a subtler kind of magic keeping them safe. Gwen reels. This is Morgana’s gambit—unleashing a lion in the garden and hoping it catches the snake.

“Nimueh,” Uther mutters, grip tightening around his sword. He examines her: unchanged as always, dragging him back to the past. “Stop these absurd theatrics immediately. This castle is full of armed soldiers who answer to me alone. You’ll never survive—” abruptly his voice dies in his throat, replaced by a horrid choking.

“Silence!” Nimueh roars, face contorting into a hellish mask before settling as placidly as a lamb. She sits tall and straight, with her white fingers curled around the arms of the King’s throne. “Court is in session.”

Uther’s fingers scrabble impotently against his neck as Nimueh looks on coolly. Morgana’s hand trembles in Gwen’s, but neither of Uther’s children step forward to help him.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Nimueh asks offhand. “No matter. What do you care, if I die? What’s one sorcerer’s life worth to you?”

Uther slumps and gasps as air returns to his lungs. Still, he looks up fiercely from under his brow. “No more than any other rat, that’s sure enough.”

“Is that so?” Nimueh smiles gracefully and tips her hands upwards to the sky, speaking low and official. “Uther Pendragon, you stand accused of the crime of state orchestration of mass murder. The method is specified as burning, beheading, and stabbing. As a King abusing his ruling power this is classified as a high crime, of the order wherein the only overseeing power is that of the old

ways. In their stead this servant and vessel is now presiding. If there be any witness to the act, let them speak. *Flównyss.*"

Beside Gwen, Merlin cringes minutely, eyes flashing in answer. On her other side, Morgana starts abruptly. Gwen almost doesn't notice it at first, but it becomes readily apparent—all up and down the hall, blood is seeping up through the seams of the floor. It twists in thin threads between the stones, strangely vital, dark and old like wine but also unmistakably not anything but blood. Gwen picks up her foot in some inborn squeamish reaction, but finds it has avoided running under her shoes or anyone else's, like it refuses to tolerate remaining underfoot.

As she watches, the intersections of different lines pool and grow heavy. The jewel-like gore clots up like thickening jelly, squirming and oozing apart into dozens upon dozens of fat lumps. The lumps churn and stretch as they differentiate and in their moving Gwen sees the flash of tiny eyes, and hears the chittering of tiny teeth and nails. In the space of a minute, the great hall is turned into a theater of blood-red rats.

There are dozens upon dozens, an uncountable mass, and their sheer numbers send a chill up her spine, because their eyes watch avidly in a way that is not like rats at all. Merlin is shivering like a man taken by deathly fever. Morgana is still as a stone. Arthur is unnaturally quiet with his hand on his sword, and Gwen herself is trying to focus only on the people beside her.

Uther looks like he's seen death itself. He's frozen mid turn, looking just over his shoulder at his new audience, sword canted awkwardly just off his hip. He watches the rats and the rats are watching back.

"Fantastic animals," Nimueh says. "their hands are almost human."

"This is an illusion," Uther replies in a haze. "No more material than vapors. It means nothing to me."

Nimueh shrugs her bare shoulders coyly. A rat scrabbles up the tattered skirt of her dress, and she lets it climb onto her hand and up her arm, curling into the crook of her neck. She turns her face towards it slightly, smiling her devilsome smile. "Unfortunately, the witnesses can't speak for themselves."

"We can."

Merlin's hand falls out of Gwen's. She turns sharply to see his eyes gold and unseeing, and he speaks in a low and even tone.

"Men—women—children—from our homes, in the streets, in black hoods, at spear point."

Uther blanches. Gwen retakes Merlin's hand and squeezes fiercely as Arthur starts to panic and grabs him by the shoulders, but Merlin doesn't react.

"Children—oh my god, spare my son—begging—everyone begs at the end, darling—in the end he just had bad blood—that's too much blood, Mary that's so much blood—I wish we could at least be married, before we go—where are you going, don't you dare leave me behind—if you're behind again I'll sell you out faster than—You have to run faster, please lamb—lambs to the slaughter, all of us—we're all that's left, now—mum left such a long time ago, is she ever coming back—oh Christ, there's no coming back from this, look at what you've done—look at what you've done. Look at what you've done!"

"Stop this!" Arthur shouts at Nimueh. "Release him!"

Nimueh's face has gone blank at Merlin's words, and while she's looking at Arthur she's also looking past him. It doesn't matter. Merlin speaks before she can reply.

"Don't worry, I'm only borrowing."

Merlin is still now, and his voice has an odd smallness threaded with a boldness that's almost in line with his usual defiance but not quite. He holds his body differently. The limbs are subtly unaware of their relation to each other, and he looks around with his whole head, like a wide eyed child. Arthur senses the change and steps back as Merlin brushes past him, watching with blank dread.

Merlin walks directly up to Uther in short, meek steps and tilts his head, squinting at the King. Uther sneers levely back, but Merlin just continues to squint and walks in a wide arc around him, as if he expects to find the man has grown a tail. Eventually he settles, drawing his feet together and folding his fingers restlessly.

"Always wondered what you looked like, sire," he says. "I've only died the once but I've made up my opinion that you ought to know the face of the one who kills you."

Uther does not speak.

"Go on, ask me who I am," Merlin says, fey and sad.

"You are Arthur's idiot manservant, do not beguile me," Uther spits.

"No, I put him away for now. Go on."

Uther glares. However his silence provokes Merlin to frown, and with his frown comes a threatening flash of gold. Around them the mischief of rats raise their heads and click their teeth, filling the chamber up to the arched ceilings with noise, and Uther subtly recoils.

The King capitulates. "Who are you," he measures, less questioning than handing over the words like coins.

"My mum named me Aysa. I was born under a star of good harvest, and when I was five I decided I was going to live my life weaving, because of the pretty patterns. When I was six you took my parents."

Gwen inhales sharply.

"They made sure I didn't see them burn but I was there when they were taken away, and after that I couldn't stand the sound of screaming, even if it was just playing. The other children, they didn't know why they hated me but they did, and eventually they learned. Merek had a lisp and it always sounded funny when he called me sorceress, like thorthruth, but I never laughed because he hit boys and I didn't know if he had decided whether he would hit girls. Every year your men would come round and I knew that they were waiting for me to pop, like watching for the moment a pie starts to brown.

I did pop, I wouldn't be here if I didn't. When I was thirteen I made a fig tree bloom in winter just for wanting something sweet to eat, and I did exactly what I was meant to: I went to crying to my guardian and I said I needed help so I would never ever do it again. I burned the next Sunday.

It means nothing to me now, but you should know what it was like. The hand of the guard was almost as wide as my upper arm was long. In the dungeons my arms were too small for the manacles, so they used common rope instead. And the fire—you choose fire on purpose, I know,

because it's supposed to be the most painful way you could possibly die. My lord, you have the pleasure of knowing that you were right."

Uther shivers involuntarily, trapped under Merlin's unfailing stare. Morgana looks like she might be sick.

"King Uther, If you can find any words for me, then maybe you could for the uncounted more. But if not, then it is not to be. So know it's not impudence when I ask: do you have anything to say to me?"

Uther pushes up his shoulders against the weight of so many eyes. Nimueh is watching, sitting high in her chair. Gwen and Arthur and Morgana are watching frozen in their places. And all around them, legions of shining red eyes.

"If there was a time that words could mend, it is long past," Uther says.

Merlin smiles sadly. "I feared it so."

All at once the warlock shudders and goes limp. Arthur just barely reaches him in time to catch him, gathering him in his arms and pulling him away from the center of the room. Before Gwen can even lay a hand on him he's already blinking awake again, flecks of gold fading in his eyes. He assures Arthur again and again that he's fine, but it doesn't stop the prince from glaring daggers at Nimueh.

The High Priestess is unbothered. She reaches out one hand, and with a whispered word Uther's crown comes clean off his head and flies into her grip. Uther shouts in outrage but she continues as if she doesn't hear him, murmuring magic as she traces the crown's rim with two fingers. She touches it and it bends and folds like parchment, twisting into an ornate balance scales. She places it on the arm of the throne, and as she sets it down the rat on her shoulder scurries down her arm and into one scale, instantly tilting the bar as far as it will go. Nimueh tuts and leans forward again.

"If there be any who can defend this man, let them speak," she decrees.

Uther instinctively turns to the children he had just sentenced to death. Their answering looks are hard and shut away. Gwen may never understand what passes between children and a father like that, but she remembers well how in her years each in turn had sought to strike him down at least once. She remembers Uther locking Morgana in the dungeons for speaking up, and hesitating to save Arthur if it meant risking himself. Any mercy he gets will not be from his own kin.

There's no mercy left for him at all. Gwen searches herself for the words on principle, but it doesn't belong to her.

In the weighty silence, something changes in Uther. The old King sees the army of his allies and friends decimated by his own hand, and the years show on him more clearly without the veneer of blustery righteousness. He looks like he did after they lost Morgana, old and infirm and gutted by the reality that the things he throws away don't come back.

Nimueh smiles at this. She plucks a single red hair off the rat and drops it on the other scale. "Well Uther? What do you have to say for yourself?"

For a long moment he stands there, weighing the situation in his mind. He turns to her, closing the distance between them until he stands at the foot of the dais. "I could tell you sorcery is an abomination before God but the words are tired. I know when I've failed because I am used to failing. I failed Ygraine all those years ago and I've never recovered the velocity of it, only

plunging further downwards.

A King may have no private grief, and certainly no private vice. I did what I thought was right, and that is the great affliction of our kind. I could not overcome the wretchedness of human nature when I was raised with a blade in hand, and for that the land is done with me. This is the story of every King, and it always shall be. I am the ending age, and I accept this, but never forget that my Kingship was an age. Never forget the jailor, or the executioner, or informant. We were all living in the damned years; it was just that I will never leave them behind.

My sin is that I was damned to live by the sword, until the day I die."

In one motion Uther raises his sword and lunges forward, plunging it into Nimueh's stomach as she shouts in the old language. Shock dawns on the High Priestess's face, but not for herself. The blade doesn't shed a single drop of blood, passing through her like a shadow. Uther falls forward into a throne as a wound opens in his own abdomen, a perfect mirror of what should have struck Nimueh. The scales clatter to the floor, and Arthur and Morgana rush forward as rats scatter underfoot.

"foolish, foolish man," Nimueh whispers, supporting Uther by the shoulders. His children lift him off of her, laying him on the marble floor. There's something of a tenderness the sorceress, like she's coming unfrozen from her moment in time. The work is complete, and the roles of tyrant and executioner melt away, and despite the devastation of history for a moment it's just two old friends, the last of their kind, parting for the final time.

"I've delayed too long," Uther manages to choke out. "She hates…to wait."

Gwen knows better than anyone that kings die like anyone else. Ingloriously, with imperfect legacy. Uther at least dies with his children by his side, and as much as they've wanted each other dead the tattered family ties are old chains rattling in the night, and you could hardly blame them for crying.

One by one, the rats stray to the far walls and clamber out the windows, disappearing into the sun washed courtyards. When there are none left, Nimueh stands, dyed in the blood she had plotted so long to spill, the last survivor of a slaughter from long ago. Arthur and Morgana stand too, then, and Morgana retreats to shelter herself in Gwen's side.

Nimueh strides down from the dais to where they all stand, stepping over sleeping guards, eyes passing over each of the four of them: Gwen, Morgana, Merlin, and Arthur. Her face is blank; the hands confused without their driving purpose. Still, she carries herself as the High Priestess she is, full of dignity and permanent danger. "It is ended. Forgive me if I take my…"

She stops, staring at Gwen.

"You." Nimueh turns sharply to Morgana, suddenly furious. "You spoke nothing of this!"

Morgana's eyes widen. "What?"

"This one has smuggled spools of time in her own soul—it's blasphemy! It's…sick!" She reaches out. "Return what was stolen!"

Before Gwen can react, Nimueh mutters something ancient and Gwen feels like her brain is unwinding, just as Morgana bolts between them.

Chapter End Notes

tl;dr Merlin, Morgana, and Arthur stand with Gwen at trial and all get sentenced to death. Before Uther can do anything about it, Nimueh shows up to try him for genocide. And boy does she try him for genocide. In the end he dies attacking her rather than hear his verdict. As she's leaving Nimueh realizes Gwen did forbidden time travel magic and tires to undo it--just as Morgana jumps between them.

Second Hand

Chapter Notes

> Something possessed me while writing this and I legit considered butchering it to use sections for real life, but no, this is where it lives, and I want yall to have it. I hope you're chill with poetry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crack of thunder is deafening, the white of the lightning is blinding. But when her vision clears, Merlin's crestfallen face is still staring back at her. The ritual has failed.

One of the hawthorn trees is smoking, split down the middle by the lightning strike. Another roll of thunder rumbles from slightly further off, and Gwen only counts to two before the sky flashes, illuminated perfectly white for the space of a blink. She closes her eyes and the next strike lights up the insides of her eyelids. She reaches out to Merlin's trembling hands and silently reminds him not to bring down the sky on them.

"I don't know what I did wrong," he stammers.

She exhales, cool and measured. It doesn't feel real. The optimist in her had invested everything in this plan, and she can't process a future beyond it. But Camelot needs Queen Guinevere, and apparently it will not let her go.

"Nothing. Some things just aren't meant to be."

The time she took to plan her harebrained scheme catches up with her, and for days she's neck deep in land disputes, trade negotiations, and policy authorization. Her wrist aches terribly from drafting, her eyes are blurry from reading by candle light, and sleep is a distant memory. She has the feeling she doesn't want to dream, but the thought reminds her so terribly of someone dead and buried.

It's just lucky that she's not expected to entertain. This week Gwen's only diplomacy is conducted by correspondence, for what few allies Camelot retains. She can still write like a stable and confident leader, and if she absolutely had to she could even find it in her to put on the act, but as is she's snapped at the knights three separate times, and they're starting to look at her like they don't know where to step. Her mind is a wreck, ransacked and emptied out by the barest prospect of hope, rudely snatched away. She tries to resign herself to this life but it's so counterintuitive to her nature. It's just that there's nothing left to fight.

She goes to Merlin for her wrist and her eyes and he drifts about like an ancestral ghost of Camelot's withered legacy, removing and replacing glass jars and bottles, untwisting twine from bundles of herbs. She sees Gaius in him as he does it, and knows it's on purpose; he plays the part like he could be two people at once, to keep himself company. They're both amalgamations of people they used to know, chimeras of dead beloved faces. Gwen catches herself in the mirror with her jaw set like Arthur or a teasing brow raised like…

“Where’d you get that?” Merlin asks. He’s holding Gwen’s wrists to examine them, thumbing at the red ribbon tied around her wrist.

Gwen’s brow pinches. “I suppose I don’t know. I just wanted to wear it.”

Merlin hums with no particular meaning and goes back to feeling her tendons. In the end he slaps a half-magic, half physic poultice on them and tells her to rest them, which she can hardly do.

“Remind me why I write every one of these royal commissions by hand?”

“There isn’t anyone who could imitate your hand. You’re unlike anyone else, my Queen.”

Gwen pauses, quill hovering and threatening to drip ink over important documents. “What did you say?”

Sir Leon looks up briefly, then returns to his own stacks of ledgers. “No one can imitate your hand.”

“No, the…yes, right.”

Sir Leon looks up again, longer this time. Sometimes she wonders if the knights think she’s going mad. Sometimes she wonders if they’re right.

It would be the traditional way for a Queen to go, madness. She hates to be so stereotypical, but long spans without sleep make her suggestible, or even fanciful. The past few days, it’s like she’s held up by thoughts that are only half there.

After days without so much as seeing the sun, miserable and disappointed amongst the same walls that have seen her miserable and disappointed for so long, an electric unrest is itching under her skin, and eventually she decides she has to go out. She watches the knights train, leaning on a fence post like the old days, ignoring the absence at her side. The knights don’t know quite what to do with this. Her gown isn’t made for the outdoors, and is suffering terribly for the dust and mud dragging against the train. She disappears inside to change it and doesn’t fail to notice how the knights breathe easier.

Only, standing in her chambers with the rich gown in a muddle on the floor, she’s struck by a whim. It’s a terribly childish craving, but—she wants to hit something. She wants to exhaust the blood and bone and muscle under her skin until her lungs blaze. And in a manner akin to sleepwalking, as soon as she’s thought it she’s slipped on a pair of riding trousers and a Camelot-red tunic and comes bounding down the stairs.

No one’s in the armory, and she pages through the spare training swords until she finds one she likes well enough, not even bothering to fix it in its scabbard. It takes her a long time to choose because there’s one she liked much better. The thing is a work of art and she doesn’t know how it got there to begin with—pattern weave steel, beveled fuller, with a ricasso and a bastard hilt. But it’s not dulled, so she takes what she can get and rushes up to the training field. As she trots to a stop in front of the low fence, the men stare at her with blank confusion. She stares back with all the strange and hungry fire burning in her gut, and quirks a smile.

Madwoman indeed.

“My Queen?” Sir Leon says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“I have a mind to hit something. Would one of you spar with me?” she asks sweetly.

The knights exchange glances from the corners of their eyes, resolutely silent, leaving their captain to the wolves. After a long, disbelieving pause Sir Leon steps forward. “I would be honored.”

Gwen purses her lips. “No, not you, you used to let Arthur win. Sir Percival, how about it? For me?”

Percival’s eyes widen comically, but there’s no one who can save him. “…as you wish, my Queen.”

Leon manages to keep Gwen still long enough to get into proper armor, but her hands are itching for a sword and she wants to go *now*. The minute she’s buckled in Gwen squares off across from Percival, and dives in without hesitation. When she’s not immediately knocked on her arse, she frowns.

“Don’t go easy!” Gwen barks.

Percival hedges. “My Queen…”

“You won’t break me, Percival. Show me what my knights can do.”

Before he can have the chance to think about it, she lunges into striking range and swipes at his side, and he catches it with the ease of practiced reflex. She keeps on, smiling manically as his blows unwind into his actual fighting strength, watching his caution turn to shock as she actually keeps up.

For a while, anyways. One square on hit from the man is powerful enough to send her flying, and the impact of her back with the earth shakes her ribs and robs her lungs of breath, but it feels simple and honest. She sees the sky, and it seems significant. She cuts through the horrified silence with a throaty laugh.

The strangest thing happens in the lower town.

Merlin and Gwen are out walking under a mild glamour to disguise them, surveying the lives of the people Gwen is responsible for, trying not to suffocate on stale castle air. Merlin buys her an apple from a stand, and she tucks it into the pocket of her cloak. They aren’t going anywhere in particular, and she lets her feet take her where they may. It happens to be a merchant district that had once been a boon from Uther’s watchful eye.

There’s no reason for her to turn down the narrow side street, but she does. They’ve barely taken two steps when a row of purple lights rise up out of the street in a wave. It’s not like such a sight is impossible in her Camelot, but something about it arrests her. They seem like something from a bygone era; a work of subtlety, or even subterfuge, but still so deliberately beautiful.

Without thinking, she reaches out and tries to hold one in her hands. It only half works, the feel not quite solid but still implying force, like magnets repelling. It’s warm, like a living animal. Nameless emotion crashes over her like a tidal wave.

There are words waiting on her tongue, the kind that are an elemental feeling only masquerading as something that could be communicated, like ‘I want to go home’ or ‘I miss you.’ She almost knows the shape of them.

“Gwen? You’re crying,” Merlin says, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

And out loud, Gwen says:

“I’m fine. Just moody.”

But in her head, Gwen is thinking:

I need you here.

And she feels rather than hears it when, somewhere in the fabric of time, someone replies *okay*.

In the morning, Gwen wakes up in the Queen’s quarters with a still-young Morgana by her side. Pure blue light of barely broken dawn streams in through the windows, and her nerve-ends tingle pleasantly with a sensation that’s a distant cousin to pins and needles. It keeps her strangely calm as memory washes over like an incoming tide. The two of them are curled towards each other on their sides in the grand canopy bed, Morgana’s hands resting between them. Gwen doesn’t hesitate to cover them with her own, and she observes passively as Morgana’s pale green eyes slip open lazily, like a cat’s.

“This isn’t right,” Gwen muses mildly.

Morgana blinks, looking at her with wonderment. Her long hair rustles like water as she pushes up on one elbow, half leaning over Gwen. “You’re old,” she gasps.

Gwen laughs quietly, wary of shattering the stillness that holds them close. “thirty-six is hardly old.”

Morgana reaches out and presses a thumb to her cheek. “You have wrinkles.”

Gwen smiles so her dimple curves around the digit, demonstrating exactly how she got such marks. Though she knows they’re hardly there at all—Morgana is the only one who would notice, and only because of the lack of intervening years.

Speaking of.

“What did Nimueh do?” Gwen asks, though she hardly wants to know.

Has it all…

Was that it? Her second chance, spent already. All of her carefully laid plans…but they hadn’t stuck to begin with. Once she was there, the people were too human and unpredictable and beloved. It was all she could do to ride the wave of their love and ambition and take the adventures for what they were. She supposes she would be incapable of regretting it.

“No, nothing like that.”

Morgana snatches her from her thoughts, reading her worries plain on her face.

“I interrupted—put a flaw in the weave. It’s like Ariadne in the minotaur’s maze…except it’s all coming unraveled now.”

Gwen doesn’t feel compelled to ask what she means. Knowledge feels like a looser concept at the moment. Instead she interlocks her fingers with Morgana’s and revels in the living feel of her skin.

Gwen has never known a bedmate in this bed.

“I can’t hold on. Time is getting away from me,” Morgana whispers. Her mouth trembles and Gwen has a fancy to kiss it still. She doesn’t.

“I have you,” Gwen says instead. Morgana smiles faintly and falls against the pillow again, her face inches from Gwen’s. She can see each dark eyelash where they fan over her cheek, can trace the exact bow of her lips. Morgana looks at her with the subtle implication that they are not as complicated as they feared, and that it’s all been spelled out before, at one time or another.

“It’s always been us, hasn’t it?”

Gwen has half a second to wonder—to imagine if in that moment, Morgana’s eyes are just as old as her own. Before she can even figure it the whole scene is slipping away like the bedclothes are being pulled out from under her.

Time dislocates from its socket, and it sounds like *again, again again.*

Twelve is, by Gwen’s approximation, old enough to do just about anything. She can watch the forge by herself, and cook for herself, and sew her own clothes. She buys bread for the house when her father is busy and she’s even allowed to hold the swords and knives if someone’s watching. But even to her own practical sense, twelve seems a bit young to become a Lady’s maid.

She expresses as much to her father, who is very keen on getting her set early with a job that will keep her well housed and fed through life without breaking her back. He winks and says the Lady may be more in need of a friend than a maid. This seems strange to Gwen, because if a Lady wanted friends shouldn’t she be able to send for them? But apparently no, so on a sunny august morning she puts on her best dress and marches up to the castle with her father a few steps behind.

In the castle courtyard servants are bustling about with quilts and flowers and bottles of wine. Her father tells her it’s for the centennial celebration of the Pendragon dynasty, and then separately explains what centennial means. It is, by all accounts, a very long time. The flowers are pretty, but she knows a hayfield with some pink ones that would look better. She tells her father this, and he says maybe she can show the Lady.

When they reach the receiving room arranged for the occasion, there’s a line out the door of other, neater looking girls with richer looking fathers. This does not scare Gwen. On the contrary, it lights a fire in her to do well by her pride. She keeps her head high, and when her turn comes she strides in confidently to meet the head maid.

The head maid is an authoritative woman with pure silver hair, and her smock alone is finer than anything Gwen’s ever worn. She asks Gwen about mending and cleaning, which Gwen knows all about, and about etiquette, which Gwen has gotten through well enough on principle of good manners. Seated behind her is a man who must be the King, because he wears a gold crown that looks quite cumbersome, and a little girl, who might be the prettiest thing Gwen has ever seen. More like a painting than a person, and Gwen has seen as few paintings as girls as pretty as this. But staring’s not polite so Gwen keeps her eyes down and answers until there are no more questions.

Her father steps up and takes her hand, and she mulls over the image of the King. She frowns as he leads her away, and whispers, “he doesn’t look a hundred.”

There's a quiet gasp from the head maid. Apparently they weren't quite so far away as she thought. Gwen risks a glance over her shoulder—the King looks flatly unimpressed, but the Lady…

The Lady is laughing.

After that, her father tells her to temper her expectations. She knows how to temper iron but does not know how to apply the same principles to expectations, so she waits on pins and needles until a letter comes with the official seal of the King. It tells that the Lady Morgana has specially requested her services, beginning posthaste. Her father can scarcely believe his eyes, but Gwen remembers the smile the Lady hid behind her sleeves and it makes perfect sense to her. She doesn't yet know the Lady Morgana but she firmly believes they'll get along famously.

Gwen goes up the very next day. By nightfall, her fingers are chapped with soap and tangled in string as Lady Morgana teaches her how to play cat's cradle.

The Lady talks idly as she crosses the strings. "This one is past, and this one is future, and they go over and under and back again."

Gwen blinks, head fizzy. "I think we've overcorrected."

Morgana smiles and drops one finger, and the whole knot comes tumbling apart.

Gwen spreads soft cheese over a slice of fresh bread, shooing away an interested wasp that drifts too close. It doesn't quite seem complete; salt and pleasant bitter without something sweet to balance it. She smiles, remembering suddenly, and pulls an apple from her pocket. She cuts it into thin wafers and tops it with cheese, passing it over to Morgana.

Morgana takes it with her quiet and dazzling smile, fingers brushing, and nibbles it slowly. The sun falls gently on her face, still rounded with baby fat, and turns the stray strands of her hair copper-red, slippers kicked off and abandoned so she can feel the grass under her feet. Gwen is in her red dress, the one she's had the longest, and it could be any one of a hundred different picnics over the years.

"Last night I had my first nightmare," Morgana says abruptly. Gwen bites down on apple and finds it a touch sour. "I didn't know it was the first, of course. Uther caught a sorcerer and today he'll be executed. There's nothing strange about dreaming something you know will come to pass."

"So soon?" Gwen says with grief. Morgana wouldn't make her nightmares known for years, yet.

"Only a handful of times before I came of age," Morgana replies, dismissing it. Gwen can't. It stabs at a primal wound. Morgana has always had all of Gwen, with no secrets or exceptions, but the Lady only ever showed fragments of herself to Gwen, never quite playing by the same rules. Gwen understands why. She also understands why they did all the other pyrrhic things.

Gwen hands Morgana another slice of sour-sweet apple and looks to the shadows to the bodies of the trees, wondering if they are long enough that that nameless man is dead. Just two lambs grazing on unmarked graves. A drunkard with a broken eyeglass once told her that the dead speak only in poetry. She wonders if she would know how to read it.

Her body is on fire, cramping up every inch, and every breath is like drawing up a heavy bucket of water from a deep well. She'll be sixteen then, the time she came near to death with blood

poisoning from a sliver of old stained glass. Her eyes won't open but she knows Morgana is there with the chair pulled up to the bedside, and if Gwen concentrates hard enough she can feel her hand on her own. She never left, as long as Gwen was unconscious with fever.

When she wakes again the fever has broken. Gaius is puttering about innocuously, holding vials of clear yellow and green liquids to the light at the window, and half draped over her legs, Morgana stares at him sharply. Her hair is in two braids, a style she hasn't worn in longer than Gwen can remember.

"He used magic," she says incredulously. "After everything he said, he knew that you were going to die and he used magic to save you."

Gwen can't say she's surprised. Gaius was always such a sweet old hypocrite. "Before everything he said, technically."

Morgana pouts like the child she still is. "It's not fair. How could he do something like this, but then try to ignore my magic until it went away? He helped Merlin, why couldn't he help me?"

Gwen expends all the energy she has to lift her arm and pet Morgana's hair. "I don't know. After everything he's borne out of loyalty to Uther, I don't know if any of us could understand his mind."

Her gaze flits to Morgana incidentally as she says it, and so she can see it in her eyes when they draw the same parallel. It's so vivid that for a moment Gwen wonders if Morgana is sending her visions. She sees it in startling color: the Camleot before theirs, attended by all the same players in an overfamiliar drama. A sorcerer who gives up everything for loyalty to his king. A king who denies the magic that's the lifeblood of the land. A high priestess who seeks to kill him for his ignorance. A queen who can't save any of them. They have all happened before, a recursive image spiraling ever inwards.

The candle in the tray is nothing but a residue of burnt wax. It's coloured grey by the molting of the charred canopy of Morgana's bed.

"That candle was a lot more trouble than it was worth," Gwen says.

There's no reply. Gwen turns in place, searching for Morgana, but she isn't there. Unfortunately, it illuminates the timeline perfectly clearly. Morgana is with Alvarr and his rebels, delivering the stolen Crystal of Neahtid. No one ever tells her this; she learns years after the fact from Merlin in the eternal process of unraveling the mess of secrets that make up their lives. It's just something else that Morgana never told her, and another time she never asked. Maybe that was their curse. Morgana always left, but Gwen never asked her to stay.

She hates the candle because she can't blame it. Morgana's magic could never have stayed suppressed forever, no matter what Gaius had hoped. And it's not just that it couldn't, it shouldn't —Gwen has seen the light in Morgana's eyes when she casts for herself and not for war now, and she wouldn't sacrifice that for anything. But if she can't blame it on the candle, then what is there? If it can't be blamed on circumstance—the direction of the winds, the lighting of a candle, the placement of the stars—then it has to be them that are damned.

Stars, oh stars. Gwen is remembering to hate them.

The west tower is a mess of burning rubble under the thin light of the moonless, starry sky. Gwen

stands in the collapsed stonework with her crown heavy on her head, peering into the night. It's a deep, viscous dark, eating up sound and laying heavy on her shoulders.

"I went too far," Morgana's voice comes. "I'm lost."

Gwen whirls around to face her, picking out her pale face in the black. Morgana's clothing melts into the darkness around her, and the eye can't quite tell where she begins and ends. Her hair is pinned high and wild and kohl rims her eyes, but the effect pales in comparison to the halo of magic crackling around her.

"It never happened this way," Gwen says, because it's true. The closest was the Dark Tower, and even there Gwen didn't exactly have her crown. They never stood like this, even footed, one matriarch to another.

"Maybe it should have. Maybe we should have been permitted that much."

The only sound is the crackle of fire and the low howling of the wind.

"Why are we here?" Gwen asks. The wind is picking up enough that she practically has to shout it. Her silk skirts raise up and snap with it, bringing a biting chill.

"Maybe time can't change anymore, or it all gets tangled." Morgana looks like she did so often in her last years at Camelot: torn, confused, vulnerable. "Gwen, I'm sorry, but I think one way or another we're going to the same graves."

The night is cold, but inside Gwen a fire is taking hold.

It's one thing to think it, but the minute it's coming out of someone else's mouth Gwen can't stand to hear it. She doesn't bother to lift her skirts as she steps over the loose stones and shattered glass, embroidered slippers finding their footing amongst busted open granite and splintered coals. She walks towards Morgana and Morgana doesn't move, melting in and out of the black like a ghost. She doesn't flinch as Gwen comes face to face with her, staring her down with the full force of her hard-won regality.

"Am I your Queen?" Gwen asks.

"The only crown I'll ever answer to," Morgana replies.

"Then I command you not to give up."

In spite of herself, Morgana smiles.

Black, as dark as the inside of a stone.

Is it possible to make a better future? Or are doomed to the one we inherit?

We gave so much for the future they promised us was just over the next hill. But every time we climbed that hill it was just more of the same. The harder we tried the more we fell apart, and Gwen, we tried so hard. Why was it like that?

All of us were only doing what we thought was right. By god, we were dying to do the right thing. I wanted to liberate the land and you wanted to save it. Even my father, in his sick way, wanted to protect his people. We were blind horses pulling the chariot in every direction, and whenever we

went out on a limb for what we thought was right that limb was cut off.

No matter how many times we unstring and reweave the same patterns of our lives, the most we can hope is to make better mistakes. Is that how it is? Knowing what's coming only makes us educated fools. Hang us with love and we'll go smiling.

Gwen?

Oh, I don't know.

The one thing we couldn't do on pain of death was love each other decently. It's a very simple thing and we made it so complicated. And maybe that's just how the heart was built—it has an easier time being broken than fixed. But I don't think so.

You don't think do?

The sound of wind, that knows it will wear away the stone given time.

My eyes redraw the world every time I open them.

I have been given my prophecies, and none of them are about me,

And I have seen the fates cutting, and they do not answer me,

And I have read the great histories, and they do not account for me.

It's more than gods and mortal men that try to define the shape of the world,

But I open my eyes and it is drawn again.

When I'm told sacrifices are necessary, I ask,

For whose gods?

Bring me the man who preaches for them

and he won't be able to put them in my sky.

Take me to the self-flagellating believers

and I'll wash their wounds between the beatings.

They will put the blood back just as fast but it will never stop me from showing compassion.

It's not true to say

I refuse to live on the terms of ecstatic suffering,

Though I would do that all the same.

I can't refuse them when I know nothing of them.

The only terms my life acknowledges are written in my own hand,

And they have never heard of necessary evils

Or the cult of romantic tragedy.

The words mean nothing,

I do not live in that world.

What's it like, in the world where you live?

Hopeful.

Hopeful that pain is not the only way we know how to show that the love still exists after our zealot-headed ancestors buried it in their mistakes. That we are not doomed to become our zealot-headed ancestors, if we could find it in us to believe in the miracle of human connection.

Hoping not against hope—hoping against nothing but our own pretensions,

Destroying our pretensions because they get between my hand and yours.

There comes a day when we walk in the sun side by side.

We get there by the one great work: to have the audacity to remain together,

and all the king-killers and chain breakers and heavy-fortuned madmen we ever met won't need to look upon us to know that we have gone beyond their furthest fever dreams just by our walking.

You asked how we make the future,

and my only answer is together—

It is the only one we need.

And what cure for the inveterate lonely heart?

What of the sick woman, who needs the ill to live, and the dogs that are trained to hate all hands? Memory has us and won't let us go. There are hours that call our names and they won't stop calling, not for anything known. We have come too far, and the weight of the days behind us is cracking us to our foundations, which were never that firm to start.

Some people don't fit together again.

You were my dear so I hurt you dearly, and now that kiss of agony is the only one I'll ever be permitted to give. I think we can only truly do things once, and the rest is all astonished retracing. How else do I come to you again and again?

Not for love?

Well.

Or else the world is kind, that gives you to me again.

I have no cure in hand for a lonely heart, if there were any mortal drug that could treat it. But I have that hand to hold for as long as it takes to find it.

I know no physician who can treat the sick woman and no bestiary who would take those dogs;

But maybe give them to each other, since their best company might be the one who would never touch them.

We can never make the burden or time ride any lighter, but we fail before the starting line if we don't try to carry it together.

We don't fail because we are wretched enough to be born on this earth;

We fail because we are spring's greenest children, trying to run a three-legged race alone.

To late—we are already tied to each other.

We are irrevocably tangled up in each other's arms.

Lonely, yes, infected sometimes with incurable loneliness and such maladies as poltergeists of past,

But when we must be lonely, we will not be lonely alone.

How's that? We all go alone eventually.

It's my castle, and I say there's no such thing as alone.

What if I turn into a bird and I fly to the farthest corner of the earth, where no human being will ever walk?

You know I would be with you all the same. Just as I always have been.

What if I died in an unmarked grave, where you could never find me?

Grass would grow from the grave, and some buzz-bee would visit the grass, and passing from my tomb to yours it would carry my kiss, softer than any in life. Maybe it would even be peaceful.

And wind sounds like laughter, because time is a given.

We couldn't even be quiet lovers as graves.

Morgana shoves time back into its socket, regardless of whether it's possible, because Gwen commands it. Reality screams at the carnage she makes of its logic, the last High Priestess desecrating the last sacred laws, but bends under her hands all the same. The stars are ripped down and stitched back on in the exact arcs and alignments as they occupied the still moment before Nimueh cast her spell, and they are standing in the great hall again.

Nimueh recoils, clutching her hand to her chest as if it were burned. She stares with crazed eyes at the two of them, Morgana shaking from exertion where she stands protectively in front of Gwen with her brow low over her eyes and her arms spread wide, Gwen swaying on her feet with the strange sensation that the floor is heaving under her. Merlin and Arthur seem utterly baffled, and Gwen realizes that the time elapsed can't be more than a second. They have no idea what's happening.

There's a single suspended moment where the sluggish flow of time has nothing to do with magic, like watching a coin turn in midair. Nimueh mutters an ancient word and Morgana braces for an impact. Nimueh's eyes flick just to the left, and Morgana turns towards Gwen, face frozen in horror. Gwen feels the fiery bite of steel in her back, deep and unforgiving.

"NO!"

Morgana's shout presses hard on Gwen's eardrums, answered by the sympathetic howl of a gale

that sounds like wolves. The pain narrows and warps her vision, and she can barely concentrate to hear. Morgana turns from her and screams, and through the dancing black spots blotting her vision Gwen sees white hot flames ignite from her hands and instantly consume the length of her arms, carried off her shoulders by the wind in vicious churning whorls. Call it the blood loss, but Gwen imagines it looks like the wings of the angel of death. Morgana reaches out both hands in front of her chest, and the torrent of fire she summons rivals the sun for brilliance. Nimueh dies instantly, and Gwen knows fire is only the conduit for the power Morgana has just unleashed.

Merlin's hands are on Gwen's back, and that's good, Merlin always takes care of her. He's chanting a continuous stream of healing words, but it was never his strong suit. Still, she feels the bleeding stop, and it's enough for now.

The fire isn't dying.

If anyone is speaking, Gwen can't hear it for the roar of the flames. They fan outwards from Morgana's skirts, themselves more fire than fabric, crawling heedlessly over stone, devouring tapestries and charring the thrones to ashes. In the middle of the conflagration, Morgana stands with her eyes blazing molten gold, fingers pulling wildly at her hair, mouth open in a silent scream. She can't stop, Gwen realizes. There's more power than she should even be in possession of, and it's burning her up.

Gwen pushes away from Merlin roughly, using all the energy left in her body to stumble forward. Her back screams in pain, but she can't care.

"Gwen!" Merlin shouts, but she doesn't look back.

"Stay back!" she shouts. The air is baking hot, the kind of forceful heat she used to feel off the forge, when her father would scold her for getting too close. Shadows dance high on the walls, and the formation of sleeping guards is out of range of burning but only by a hair, and only for now. Each step is weighted with lead but she walks straight into the burn, trusting that any magic of Morgana's won't truly hurt her.

It doesn't. Flames wash over her face, her arms, her feet, like the touch of summer sunlight. Her skin is burning hot, but it doesn't char. She barely notices this as she pushes forward.

Up close Gwen can see Morgana is crying, but the tears evaporate before they fall, and Gwen wrenches her hands from her hair, holding them by her wrists. "Come back to me," she says, trying to shout over the roaring but failing to get enough burning air through her lungs to do so. Morgana doesn't answer. Her eyes are unseeing, looking far past what Gwen can understand, lost in the wilds of the old magic surging up from the earth to claim her. The Old Religion wants her back, and it never waits past the appointed hour.

However, Guinevere doesn't take promises lightly, and even if she was slow and daft enough to have never bound them together in the way they rightfully should be, she knows the claim that is written on her heart, and she remembers the simple oath Morgana swore to remain by her side as long as she has need of her, and she surely understands she has no plans to ever stop having need of her, and by every god alive in anyone's pantheon, they can't have her.

Gwen presses her lips to Morgana's hard mouth, pressing *come home* and *I need you* and *don't leave* into the kiss. It's like kissing marble, the only cool spot in the heart of the firestorm. Gwen's heart is in her throat, but then—Morgana's lips move to fit hers and everything else falls away. The fire dies away from her hands as they come up to carefully glide over the sides of Gwen's neck, her face, like she's the creed replacing the old ways and this is Morgana's conversion. Morgana is shaking, and Gwen feels her teeth click together from it as she tries to reassure her with just the

touch of her lips.

Around them the fire is receding, and when Morgana pulls away and presses their foreheads together, her eyes are gold-rimmed but clear. With a sideways glance she extinguishes the burn altogether. Gwen sighs and sags into her arms, the recent and copious blood loss making itself known.

“Gwen?” Morgana says tremulously.

“Right here. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Still, her body is unmanageably heavy. The seconds get away from her as she lets the world narrow down to the slender curve of Morgana’s neck, and distantly she hears her shouting for Merlin.

Sleep comes to her gently.

Chapter End Notes

(adds square to Roseus fic bingo that's just 'abstract spacetime fuckery')

Change

Chapter Notes

> Me, at the start of this: This is rated E it is GOING to be HORNY so help me
> Me, 11 chapters and a plot later: oh right there was going to be porn in this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After wading through the backchannels of time, Gwen's brain is mercifully worn out on dreaming and only produces the one. Gwen dreams she's in the forge with bellows in one hand and a hammer in the other, staring down at a crucible glowing yellow in the mouth of the furnace. Queen Ygraine is there, a vision of shimmering pale gold, and Gwen doesn't think to say anything as she gracefully removes her crown from her head with both hands. She hand s it carefully to Gwen, and in the way of dreams her hands are free, so she takes it. It seems uncommonly heavy, but gold often is.

Ygraine looks at her expectantly. Gwen does the only thing that seems sensible and drops the crown into the crucible. Ygraine laughs behind her hand , tittering and quiet, and Gwen joins in, feeling like they're in on some inexplicable joke. The crown glows where it comes into contact with the walls of the crucible, turning molten white and oozing down into the bowl. It's almost too bright to look at.

"What will you make?" Ygraine a sks, eyes dancing with conspiracy.

Gwen thinks. "I don't know. What can I ?"

" Anything. You know better than I. "

Ygraine looks at her with such naked pride that Gwen ducks her head and stares into the churning mess of molten gold, heart fit to burst. She counts off a list in her head of everything she could forge, but it never ends. The ones that stick with her aren't even her own preferences, but the choices she's bone deep certain o ther people would make —

Gwaine would forge a chalice, shrewdly playing the drunkard fool . He'd never let on that it was anything more , but there would be the barest twinkle of his eye every time he raised it in a toast to his friends —to health, to longevity, to love.

Merlin would make a single coin that could never be spent, a gesture of such pure sentimentality that someone somewhere would spontaneously gag. On the hardest nights , when ugly choices seemed to hunt him down specifically , he could use it as a last chance cure for his fatal indecision .

Morgana would make a mirror and laugh when they called her vain; they wouldn't be so quick to talk once she showed them their true reflection. It could never be destroyed, though many would try , because the gold is soft and pure and would only bend and warp.

Lancelot would make a compass, simple and modest , even though Gwen suspects he would know true north blindfolded and upside-down. When ill fortune blew him to the far corners of the five kingdoms, he could trust it to bring him back home to them.

Arthur would expect to smith a sword, or at least a mace—something with teeth—but when the moment came it would be a gilded shield to protect everything he loves, though that category would expand to encompass the whole world if he was given half a chance.

On and on and on. The more possibilities she imagines, the more she forgets to make an actual decision , but it doesn't quite matter .

It could be anything.

When Gwen opens her eyes she finds all her bones have spontaneously been replaced with lead. Her back is throbbing dully, warm but not overly painful, and she supposes that 's hardly something to complain about after getting stabbed . After a moment she's able to distinguish the heaviness in her legs as more than just fatigue; she tilts her creaking neck forward and finds Morgana slumped over the blanket of her own bed , conjuring a hearty sense of deja vu. Gwen doesn't move a muscle , but Morgana seems to sense her waking by pure will and sits bolt upright .

"Gwen!" she cries. Morgana dives forward and throws her arms around Gwen's shoulders , and Gwen presses her face into her neck and inhales the smell of jasmine and soap. Her shoulders twinge and she twitches minutely, causing Morgana to spring back just as suddenly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think," Morgana says.

"It's really not too bad," Gwen assures , but that in itself is a question . Her mouth firms. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Only a week ."

" A week ?!" Gwen exclaims. Her head spins. There are too many variables to fix, too many preparations— and it does beg a question. "My back. " She recalls the searing pain like lightning up her spine. " I was dying."

Morgana 's face goes unreadable. " A life for a life. In the Old Religion it's known as the power of life and death , the most sacred and advanced school or dark magic there is. By rights it makes me a fully-fledged High Priestess of the White Goddess." Her eyes are glassy but hardened. "I don't regret it. Nothing you can say will make me."

Gwen wonders , as she always does, w ho decided love is violent and sacrificial , and what goes through the minds of those who would enforce that silent edict . Maybe she should be worried of how close this new path seems to run to the old, but the change they needed was more fundamental than the titles they carry—that's just the set dressing. As long as Morgana is still beside her she has utter faith in that change. " Well the Goddess can get in line, because I had you first."

Morgana smiles.

"But really, a week? " Gwen repeats.

"You didn't miss anything fun. Uther's funeral was swiftly executed and poorly attended. Arthur's doing a lot of paperwork for the stay of executions of magic users. You got to miss his coronation, lucky girl." She smiles easily and Gwen's face heats in spite of everything.

"Next time I take a vacation, I'd like to be conscious," Gwen laments.

Morgana's eyes turn soft, her hand stealing into Gwen's. "There'll be plenty of time for that now."

The sentiment makes Gwen's heart swell, but also. "Well."

"Gwen."

"It's never that simple, is it? Cenred's still out there pl ott ing God knows what, and forgive me for saying but your sister is a total wild card, and that's not even getting into the *new* enemies we'll have made—"

Morgana shuts her up with a kiss and Gwen thinks that this is the most effective cure for her rambling ever devised. "Don't worry so much. You deserve a bit of fun. In fact—how well do you feel?"

Gwen assesses the mischievous glint in Morgana's eye and finds it irresistible. She smiles and quirks a brow, and the game is on.

Gwen leans heavily on Morgana's arm as they walk , but it's mostly just the fatigue. Her wound has already closed into a large blotch of color just to the side of her spine, courtesy of Morgana's magic. It's not e xactly good as new, but it will be in time.

They cross the market street and it seems bizarrely unchanged. Gwen stops to greet her favorite weaver and Morgana buys her a length of ridiculously rich purple cloth , the likes of which a servant could never wear, with the implication that she'll have use of it. Naturally, she refuses to elaborate further. Gwen gives her a skeptical look but is otherwise distracted by a little girl barreling past with a bucket on her head.

"Watch out, I'll slay your pants off! I'm Britomart! I'm Britomart!"

Gwen puts a hand over her mouth, cheeks already sore from smiling. Morgana raises her eyebrows slyly, stepping back into the street. Gwen falls into step behind her, and Morgana stops a beat so they come to be side by side.

"Where are we going?" Gwen asks, not for the first time. Morgana just smiles coyly and presses on. Gwen's starting to wonder if she's not being led on a wild goose chase when they come to the square, which is filled with people of every age and rank. Gwen looks to Morgana and repeats the question with her face , to no avail .

" It is I! Dragoon the Great!"

Gwen's jaw drops.

That's Merlin's voice—not his Dragoon voice, Merlin proper —coming from the center of the crowd. She pushes through the wall of people until she can see him boosting his already lanky height on an empty crate. He has his arms thrown out to the masses, and there's an informal space cleared directly around him, including a few more crates in its circumference . Around the edge of the ring of people, Gwaine and Lancelot are idling with purpose , posture subtly on alert. Merlin spots Gwen in the crowd and winks.

" My cunning is great, but my magic is greater!" Merlin announces, in the middle of the city, surrounded by witnesses. Stay of execution or no, Gwen is panicking a little. Merlin illustrates his point with a flourish of sparks, and around her the audience murmur and grow tense with—what?

Fear? Excitement? Wonder?

Morgana appears at her shoulder and Gwen gives her a pointed, querulous look.

“It’s a play. Merlin thought it would be a good idea to them used to it.”

Gwen blinks. In her time, Merlin had been so disillusioned when she finally repealed the ban. His efforts to integrate magic into Camelot were mostly practical and sterile. But this…

“And because I’m so terrible and evil, I’ve captured…this man!” Merlin says, pointing to Gwaine. Gwaine raises his hands placatingly, smiling in his easygoing way, and comes to stand at Merlin’s feet. Merlin waves his hand and a coil of rope rises out of one of the crates, looping through the air theatrically before curling around Gwaine’s wrists.

“Oh *no*! I’m defenseless to your *wicked* ways!” Gwaine says. Lancelot tries to cover his laugh with a cough.

“This is a family show,” Merlin mutters out of the corner of his mouth. Then he looks straight at Gwen. “If only there were some brave soul who could rescue this poor man from my evil, evil clutches! Maybe a warrior, or a *knight*?”

Gwen laughs incredulously, turning to Morgana. The princess simply smiles and pushes Gwen into the circle. Gwen barely prevents herself from making a very undignified squawk as she suddenly finds herself face to face with what feels like half of Camelot. She’s lost for a beat until she spies little buckethead.

“Britomart!”

Well. Game on, she supposes.

Gwen hops up onto a crate and draws an imaginary sword, pointing it at Merlin’s heart. “It is I! Britomart!” To her perpetual astonishment this earns a loud cheer. “I’ve come to put a stop your extremely evil ways, Dragoon!”

Merlin recoils dramatically, hand over heart. “Britomart! The great foe of all that is selfish and impure. I’m quaking in my boots!” he drawls. “Come off it! One Knight alone is no match for Dragoon the Great!” He adds another flush of sparks for emphasis, which is somewhat counterproductive when Gwen has seen him use that trick to stop children from crying.

Gwen sees an opportunity and takes it. “Good then that I do not come alone.” Her eyes find Morgana’s. “You may not fear me, but you should fear the good mage Amoret!”

Morgana’s eyes widen, projecting her objection as clearly as if she had spoken. Gwen jerks her head meaningfully, and they have something of a silent argument over the course of a spare few seconds. But it’s not pride or bluster that prevents the Lady from stepping up—at the last Gwen sees the fear in her eyes. She has kept her secret so carefully and for so long. Gwen softens and smiles encouragingly, trying to communicate that everything will be fine. That it has to be, because she’ll make it so. Morgana huffs but joins her by her side all the same.

“Stand down, Dragoon. You are no match for good and virtuous magic!” Morgana declares. Naturally, she was made for the stage. She reaches out and raises a drift of dust from the ground, twirling it in complicated patterns.

“Never!” Merlin crows. He stretches out his own hand in mirror and sends forth another spray of sparks, which smother themselves in the makeshift dust devil. The crowd is invested now,

stiffness forgotten the moment they had someone to root for, and they cheer on Amoret with all the fervor they would bring to a joust or melee. Citizens of Camelot, cheering for magic. Who would have thought?

“Wait!” Gwaine cries. “ No more of this terrible violence! I have only myself to blame .”

Morgana snuffs the remaining sparks in one swoop, earning an awed murmur from the crowd.

“What is the meaning of this?” Gwen asks .

Gwaine makes his signature ‘who, me?’ face and looks to Merlin. She can see the gears turning in Merlin’s head as he tries to come up with something . “He … stole my pumpkins!”

There’s an audible gasp from the produce vendor s in the audience .

“A terrible crime. There’s no saving him, my Lady,” Morgana says gravely.

“Nonsense. A Knight must uphold peace and justice, in combat or out. Good sir, why did you steal the pumpkins?” Gwen says.

Gwaine turns his face away, tossing his hair emphatically in the process. “ ’Tis too shaming. I could never speak of it.”

Merlin shrugs. “Then I guess I’ll have to smite you.”

“I shall speak of it,” Gwaine amends hastily. “ I meant no harm, for you see, I am actually an arrogant prince with no need for pumpkins. I was simply captivated by your beauty, Dragoon, but I’m too emotionally stunted to express my affections properly. ”

Lancelot does not succeed in hiding his laughter this time. Gwen herself has to summon all her years of keeping her emotions off her face in council to stay even remotely in character. The audience is about a half and half split between good natured tittering and genuine investment. Gwen spots a fellow maidservant with her hands clasped over her heart , practically swooning at Gwaine’s speech.

Merlin feigns shock, putting a hand to his chest. “ My lord, I’d never have guessed!”

“Well I am very obtuse. Can you forgive me?” Gwaine says pitifully.

“Do ya one better,” Merlin says, and dips Gwaine in a deeply ridiculous stage kiss. The crowd whistles and claps. Buckethead appears to have found her mother, who shoves the bucket down over her eyes.

“Our work here is done,” Gwen decrees. “ Come, Amoret , justice and love have need of us elsewhere.”

She hops down into Morgana’s arms, which feels a little silly considering it’s a drop of less than two feet, but she’s not complaining, and the crowd parts for them with cheers and exaggerated bows. Only, just as Merlin, Gwaine and Lancelot catch up with them, the bows suddenly turn real . Arthur stands at the edge of the square, dressed casually in his greatcoat, applauding with the rest of them.

Gwaine , predictably as the rise and set of the sun, has a cheek. “Afternoon , princess. Like the show?”

Arthur gives him his brightest, fakest smile, really more of a baring of teeth, and promptly picks Merlin up and throws him over his shoulder. Merlin giggles madly as Arthur carries him off without another word.

"How you manage to get under his skin like that after knowing him for a week—your talent is unparalleled ," Lancelot marvels.

Gwaine shrugs. " Not like I'm getting under anything else at the moment."

Gwen slaps Lancelot on the back as he sputters.

"How are you feeling?"

Gwen resists the urge to roll her eyes fondly. This is only the seventeenth time Morgana has asked. "Fit as a fiddle. Getting up and walking did me wonders. Do you believe me?"

Morgana puts down the book she hasn't really been reading , leaning back in her favorite chair. They're back in her chambers, where Gwen is pacing about aimlessly, restless in her skin. She should rest, but it's looking like it's not in the cards.

"Of course," Morgana replies, suitably contrite. " I just don't want you to strain yourself. "

Gwen stares at her, something of an understanding emerging . "You haven't kissed me since this morning."

Morgana pinks just slightly, and Gwen knows she's hit the mark. "I *jostled* you, then."

Gwen is suddenly very put out that they could have been spending this time kissing. " It was barely a twinge . You won't break me, Morgana. I'm fine! "

Morgana weighs this silently, and slowly her mouth quirks. "You'll have to prove it."

Gwen does roll her eyes this time. "Ridiculous woman." She opens her arms and Morgana pushes up out of her chair and sinks into them , slotting their mouths together easily.

Morgana's lips taste of waxy ro ug e, sliding tenderly under Gwen's. Once they've started it's like a chain reaction. Every passing second seem s to stoke a fire in the princess, a desperate need to be as close as possible. Her hands slid e behin d Gwen's neck and the small of her back, pressing them together as she lick s coaxingly at Gwen's lips. Gwen part s them readily , all too eager to taste the inside of her pretty mouth.

Morgana's hands stall above the waist of Gwen's dress , clearly unsure what is allo wed. Gwen tease s her with her tongue in a very unsporting way until she g ives into the temptation and palm s Gwen's behind —and laugh s .

" What? " Gwen asks, laughing along without knowing what at.

" All those skirts—I can't feel a thing!"

Gwen snort s and suck s at Morgana's throa t, dragging a hand up to feel her breast, and dissolv es into a fit of giggles.

"It's like a board!" s he knock s on the ribbed front of the gown wh ere it flattens Morgana's bosom.

“I finally know why they stuff us in the damn ed things,” Morgana sa ys . Gwen want s to be kissing that smile again.

“ You know…” she start s . Morgana raise s an eyebrow minutely. “ I don’t mean to impinge on your virtue—”

“Guinevere, I am begging you to impinge on my virtue.”

“ We might do better with a few less layers,” Gwen flutter s her eyelashes coyly, “is all.” Morgana nod s vigorously and trie s to fumble open the clasps of her dress, but it ’ s an elaborate, draped piece meant to show that one ha s the servants to affix and remove it , like most of her wardrobe. Gwen still s her with one hand on her shoulder, and slid es behind her.

It ’ s the most routine gesture to dress and undress Morgana, but the context ma kes it changed. Pushing the fabric from her shoulders could be and had been perfectly innocent, but it certainly i sn’t now. Gwen’s thumb brushes Morgana’s neck and she trembles in a way that gives that much away in an instant. Gwen leaves her standing in a shift thin enough that its hem flutters slightly around her ankles , and quickly stripped herself down to a similar state. When she looks up Morgana is watching her with a look that makes the blood rise in her face , and she’s suddenly shy in a way she hasn’t been in years.

“What?”

Morgana simply grins and slowly advances into Gwen’s space , caressing her face. Gwen turns into the touch and kisses the inside of her wrist. The princess slings an arm around her waist and pulls her close, and Gwen gasps to feel the full line of her body . Morgana takes the chance to steal her mouth again and Gwen’s fingernails scrape at the linen over her shoulder blades gratefull y, one hand sliding between the two them to knead Morgana’s breast. Morgana practically purrs.

She shoves her face into Gwen’s neck and Gwen can feel how hot it is even if she can’t see her flush . “Gwen,” she murmurs, “ let me lie with you. I want to please you.”

Gwen shivers and breathes in the flowery smell of her hair. “You hardly need to ask.”

The shifts end up on the floor and Morgana reclines lazily on the bed, confident in her body as always . She bites her lip as Gwen sidles up next to her, piercing eyes tracing every inch of Gwen’s skin. Her kisses turn gentle and sweet, and Gwen doesn’t say anything even though she hardly needs to be treated like such a maiden. It’s nice. It seems Morgana meant it both ways when she said she wanted to please Gwen : both to touch her and know her and also simply to spoil her.

And Morgana does touch her. After a few ghosting touches to her hips, Morgana presses her fingers flat against Gwen’s heat and damn well gropes, all pressure and no friction. Apparently she wanted to take Gwen apart slowly. Gwen’s breath comes in stuttering huff s and she gives encouragement when she has the presence of mind, a simple ‘yes’ or ‘oh’ that causes Morgana to kiss her fiercely. Eventually she’s rewarded for her patience by Morgana slipping her index finger to her hole and tracing the wetness there up the whipcord nerve of her clit .

“ A a h —please ! please , yes —Morgana, you—you —fiend!” Morgana had pulled her touch away from anything useful at the last second . She smirks .

“ A little soon , don’t you think? ” Morgana murmurs. Gwen feels briefly embarrassed , and it must show on her face because Morgana strokes up the flank of her stomach lovingly . “ Amazing . You’re being so good for me . ”

She ducks to flick her tongue over Gwen's nipple, allowing the barest scrape of teeth. Her tongue is hot and smooth and when she sees how Gwen is watching this the threads her spare hand in Gwen's and brings it up to take two of Gwen's fingers into her mouth , all while brushing her thumb softly over her clit.

Gwen keens helplessly. " Want you—inside."

Morgana takes her at her word and switches all her attention to p ush ing two fingers into her , and she has to know Gwen can't come like this . Gwen 's so ready that there's almost no resistance. Morgana toys with her hole, making shallow, teasing touches, and Gwen almost sob s when she finally sinks in up to her knuckles and curls. Morgana watched her with pupils blown wide, always telling her how good she's doing, how perfect she looks like this, all while making her ride her hand hard with no possible relief , and Gwen watches her do the watching, pure lechery in her gaze, fucking her with her eyes almost as hard as she is with her hand.

It's so good. It's torture. Morgana adds a third finger and praises her for taking it so nicely, so pretty when she's full. She works from the shoulder to thrust them hard and deep, relentless in finding their mark and coaxing surges of raw sensation that are far too much and never enough . Gwen has to twist the sheets in her fists not to touch herself and finish it, uses every scrap of her willpower to let Morgana give it to her again and again for what feels like hours , feels her knees go weak and her back go numb .

" I'm going to make you come now," Morgana finally says, and the words alone feel like the floor dropping out from under her. Morgana twists her hand and gives Gwen's clit three firm strokes of her thumb, and this time Gwen does sob as her muscles contract and her every nerve lights up with incredible sweetness. As far as orgasms go it lasts longer than anything she's had in years, and Morgana kisses her lightly as she works her through it .

Morgana's inner thighs are slick . T he minute Gwen has the presence of mind she pulls her in by the hips and flips them so Gwen's perched between her legs . She lays her hands flat on Morgana's thighs and pushes them apart, and the sorceress brings a hand to cover her mouth , smothering a whimper. Gwen steals the hand from her and tangles it with her own , pressing a kiss into the dip of her hip.

Morgana tastes perfect , and throbs wi th arousal. She mewls beautifully when Gwen sucks, tendons jumping in her thighs. It scarcely takes a minute of tracing her cunt with her tongue before Morgana comes hard with Gwen's name in her mouth.

"Well that hardly seems fair," Gwen teases her lightly , curling back into her arms.

" All that hard work," Morgana practically slurs, smiling lazily. " Sorry sweet, I don't have half your patience. "

" You'll be paying with interest next time."

Morgana snuggles against her. "Excellent."

They laze about for some time, delighting in the touch of bare skin and the warmth of the fine cotton sheets. The fall equinox has just passed, and th e air holds a promise of a future chill that won't be fulfilled for a while yet. When dinner forces them out of bed, Morgana puts all her focus into lacing Gwen into the dress that has barely cooled, her hands ghosting over the new scar on her back. She seems too full of thoughts, so Gwen kisses them out of her head.

The dining room is set for three. Gwen sends Morgana a questioning look, and the lady pulls out a chair and gestures for her to sit. Gwen does, and Morgana sits across from her. Arthur appears not long after.

He nods. "Guinevere."

"My lord," she says, mostly out of habit. Arthur's face does some peculiar acrobatics at the title: he winces, but gets bewildered with his own reaction, and finally schools his features into something appropriately kingly.

"Given the…all of it, I think you can call me Arthur."

He sits, and George brings a dish of mortis, his eyebrows doing a funny little jump when he sees Gwen at the table. Still, the man is the picture of discretion and says nothing.

"…Is there a reason I've been summoned to the King's table?" Gwen ventures, ignoring Morgana's smug looks.

Arthur clears his throat. "I wanted to speak with you about your position. About its advancement. Loathe as I am to admit it, I'm young and untried. You know what it is to be the regent of Camelot…and I need your help."

Gwen meditates on this for a long moment. "I'm not going to marry you."

"No, I had an inkling you wouldn't," he says flatly. "But I can't rule alone."

"No, it's not your way. You ought to have a full round table of people you trust to advise you, and you will eventually."

Arthur glares. "Gwen, I'm making you a head of state, I just don't know what position."

And—Gwen could well have continued to steer Camelot's revised fate from her current position. She has learned well that the seat of power is never quite where it appears. However, given the chance, this is something she can work with.

"Then we'll make it up. You're the King, you have absolute power to revise the organization of the state as you see fit. Call it whatever you like—senator, chief or head of something or other, or consul. I would be your consul, after a fashion. Two leaders as mutual counterbalances, in the Roman way."

"Consul Guinevere," Morgana tests, eyes full of mirth.

"Between this and certain personal relationships I'll go down as the most Roman king Camelot has ever seen," Arthur gripes.

"Don't forget the nose," Morgana adds.

Appeased for now, Gwen tucks into the first real meal she's had since her imprisonment. Over the last few months she's settled back into old habits, and the richness shocks her tongue. Though he'd never admit to it, Arthur always did have a weakness for luxurious foods. In the end she neatly portions off half of her meal and sends it back, knowing some stable boy or washer-woman will have no qualms with sharing.

Morgana sits tall in her seat, untampered and exuberant in a way that starkly contrasts her usual air at Uther's table. Gwen wonders at the musicality of her voice as she goes on about the finer details

of legalizing magic, speaking more charismatically than most trained orators.

Which provokes a thought. “Where’s Merlin ?”

Arthur scowls and crosses his arms silently. Morgana ’s mouth tugs at one corner. “They’re fighting.”

“How —W hat did you do !” Gwen says. She had assumed that settling the frenzied romantic tension that motivated most of their buffoonery would give the world at least a brief reprieve from their bickering.

Morgana puts on her best evil little sister face. “ When we were discussing advancement, Merlin teased that they should be married. Arthur’s in a snit because he was actually considering it.”

Gwen squints in bafflement at Arthur. “ My friend, you’ve been seeing him for a week.”

“Merlin offered to die for me practically the day we met. I think it’s only fair,” he grumbles. “ It’s not right for me to remain his direct superior , and he deserves a seat at negotiations for legalization.”

There wouldn’t be much in the way of negotiations considering Gwen already wrote the law years ago, but she decides not to bring that up. “Court Sorcerer, Arthur. He’s supposed to be Court Sorcerer.”

“ I can’t very well appoint him that while magic is still illegal,” Arthur snipes back.

Realistically, Arthur could give Merlin any number of titles, not to mention that he’s already druid royalty for all intents and purposes. She could go down the line, but she remembers then how Arthur had proposed to her: over a surprise dinner with a profusion of candles that had almost burnt her house down, with a ring made to match his mother’s. The man is a closet romantic who has been expecting to marry a stranger for political power all his life, with no real relationships to his name—he is trying his best. She’ll leave stepping on the toes of his fantasies to Merlin.

After dinner Gwen and Morgana spend a time wandering the halls, just being together. The great hall is closed off while stonemasons and glaziers repair and replace the damage, but the rest of the castle is untouched, and it could be a trick of the mind, but certain shadows seem to fall lighter than they once did. Castle Camelot breathes in a way it hasn’t in twenty-one years. Servants bustle about in pursuit of their daily duties, and as a girl not much younger than herself passes with a pitcher, she’s almost baffled to realize it’s already become like seeing someone she used to be.

Her bafflement is re doubled when the girl seems to have the same impression. She curtsies quickly and says, “my lady, my lady,” before realizing her mistake and coloring vibrantly. She apologizes and flees, and Gwen wonders what exactly it was that she saw.

Morgana asks a favor before they return to Morgana’s chambers. “There’s someone I need to speak to, but I couldn’t stand it without you. ”

Gwen smothers a pang of unease. “Who?”

Morgana raises her chin defiantly. “ Kilgharrah .”

Morgana lights the torch with a flick of her wrist . Entering into the caverns under the castle always feels like being a dormouse in a hayloft. A place large enough to hide a dragon is

understandably humbling in scale.

For once, Kilgharrah doesn't come from above. His piercing gi lt irises—eyes of pure magic — blaze up from the shadowed recesses of the deepest crags of the cave, and as he prowls up to the ridge that serves as his informal perch he makes sure to rattle his chains, jerking his hind leg until the echoes and the original become indistinguishable. His legs fold under him like a cat as he flattens the length of his neck to look at them.

"The witch, and the heretic."

" N ot nice words," Gwen says reflexively.

" No one has ever called me nice," Kilgharrah replies. He means it as a threat but Gwen almost finds it sad.

"Great Dragon," Morgana starts, "I have a thing or two to say to you."

Kilgharrah blows a billow of hot air through his nose , tail lashing against the rocks. " Who says I will listen?"

"I don't suppose you will. It doesn't matter either way —I'll just keep coming back until you do." Morgana struts forward to the very edge of the cliff face , presenting herself fearlessly. " Whatever it is that you think I am, I 'm not. I'm sure it would be easier for you if there was a single architect to all suffering, but if you insist on making it me then I defy you. If you care at all for Merlin, or for Albion, then sooner or later you will have to understand that I am your ally, and you are mine."

" You cannot defy your destiny," Kilgharrah rumbles, like a rote motion.

"Haven't you heard?" Morgana replies, lips curling. "Fuck destiny. And hang fate while you're at it. Arthur's K ing and it's going to stay that way for a long, long time. We have the power to make sure of it."

" No army can turn the tide of fate," Kilgharrah says redundantly, the shoulders of his wings rising in agitation.

Gwen grits her teeth. " No army. Just some determined individuals who take issue, who happen to be the most powerful people alive, and are the first, last, or only of their kind, who are in a kind of love that is very dangerous for someone like you."

"You threaten me?" Kilgharrah says

"No," Morgana says, although Gwen privately thinks otherwise. " We're simply telling you the future. You enjoy that, do you not? "

" Your doom is inev itable, *witch* ! "

A thin gale of fire spews past his teeth as he spits this, but Morgana bends it away from them with a word. She holds his gaze for a moment before stepping back and taking Gwen's hand, turning towards the tunnel up to the dungeons. She tosses one final look over her shoulder.

"See you tomorrow, Kilgharrah . I'll bring my sewing."

“Luckily almost everything is in the southeast. We can skirt the mountains through Ascetir and skirt between the mountains of Isgaard and the border through to Balor to meet the druids, before crossing over into Escetir north of the Feorre mountains. We’ll have an official invitation from Cenred at that point, but I don’t want to be there any longer than necessary with such a recognizable official retinue. We should come out almost directly at Balinor’s doorstep, or cavestep , I suppose. From there the tomb of Ashkanar is a light day trip. Then it’s up to Cenred’s castle and back round through Ealdor, and we’ll drop in on Percival while we’re on the border again.”

Gwen straightens from where she’s bent over the war room table as she speaks, feeling something like a door hinge in her newest, stiffest dress, which was actually an abandoned pet project of Hollace’s that would never have seen the light of day if Gwen hadn’t needed court appropriate clothing fairly immediately. A more bespoke, less strangling set of dresses is currently under the druid’s needle, after a long day of being measured and fitted every which way while Morgana and Hollace formed a blood sisterhood over the weft and waft of colored silks. Gwen does love beautiful clothes, but the energy those two had taken on at the opportunity of drawing up an entire courtly wardrobe (“for the most beautiful woman in the five kingdoms” Morgana had added) was beyond her comprehension. Hollace’s expression had been something akin to childish glee, and that was just beyond natural belief.

Merlin speaks up from where he’s hovering at Arthur’s side out of habit. “I think Aithusa ought to wait.”

“Merlin!” Morgana reprimands. “That’s our child you’re talking about!”

Merlin tugs at the sleeve of his jacket—which is unchanged. The betrothal tiff had ended as swiftly as it began once Arthur communicated his thoughts and feelings—and wasn’t that progress—and Merlin, incurable pushover, just couldn’t stay mad. Not that he had agreed to marriage, of course. Merlin is also holding out on taking on any title for the principle of the thing. “Operative word child. I won’t bring a baby dragon to Cenred’s doorstep, diplomatically or no.”

“Seems wise,” Arthur says. “If we’re going to go disturb ancient magics, better to do it once we’re sure we’ve put Cenred in his place.”

There’s a sudden thunk . Lancelot lifts Gwaine’s head off the pages of The Care and Keeping of Camelot, which he has just fallen asleep on. For the fifth time. She really hopes he doesn’t damage the binding.

“Alright,” Gwen rallies, “The whole thing in reverse, then.”

There’s a round of approving words (and grunts). Morgana cuts in before they can move on fully from the topic. “And not until after Gwen’s coronation.”

“Stop calling it that, it’s treason,” Arthur says tiredly.

“I’m sorry, I meant her ascension to divinity.”

“How did anyone ever think you were an only child?”

“How did anyone ever think you were a gentleman? Poor Merlin hasn’t taken off that neckerchief in a week, you brute.”

Merlin makes a sound like a startled animal, clutching at the offending scarf as though someone might yank it away. Arthur opens his mouth to retaliate, but the afternoon volley of Pendragon

sibling bickering is abruptly interrupted when the doors to the war room swing wide, banging against the walls loudly as a solid looking nobleman charges into the room pursued by guards. The man thrusts out a finger at Arthur.

“King Arthur Pendragon, you consort with sorcerers !”

Everyone unconsciously looks to Merlin, who is still holding his neckerchief tight against his neck. Arthur squares his shoulders and looks the man in the eye.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The guards hover awkwardly, unable to make any kind of move on a lord without clear provocation or the King’s word. The man gapes, near hysterical. “You’ve been enchanted. You must have been.”

Arthur looks mildly at Merlin. “Do you hear that, Merlin? I’ve been enchanted. How could you let this happen?”

“I try my best, sire, but you do wander off.”

The nobleman gains a look of terrible realization. “No, you... you believe this. You would destroy everything Uther built with perfect clarity. You’ve gone mad, or you always were and were sly enough to hide it. But know this—the gentry of Camelot won’t simply accept the chaos you’re sewing. Legacy and virtue—”

“That’s enough,” Arthur cuts in firmly. The man quiets despite himself at the King’s tone, and Arthur pushes up from his chair and strides across the room to face him. Gwen keeps a firm hand on Merlin’s shoulder, and it feels like static building under her palm. “I understand the fear of change, in the sense that I know why snake, who needs the sun to warm its blood and sleeps through all the long winter months, would be terrified to see such a thing as snow, but that doesn't make me cancel the winter hunts. I hear your words, but they are not more elevated than any other citizen’s, and at the end of the day I will do what’s best for Camelot regardless of whether it makes you comfortable. If the old guard need to call me a madman to comprehend this, then by all means, call me mad. I’m warm blooded enough to take it.”

The courtier is stunned silent. Arthur takes advantage of the momentary hesitation and nods to one of the guards and politely asks that the man be escorted out. Gwen doesn’t think anyone has ever been prouder of Arthur in this moment, but then she sees Merlin’s face.

And really, it’s all of them. Even Gwaine , who has no earthly reason to be that invested at this point, seems giddy with the electric air of transformation that seems to vibrate from the very stones of Castle Camelot. The feeling is caught between the perfect exhilaration of being a child whispering in the dark, and the fathomless awe of looking out over a valley that time hasn’t touched for decades, and still won’t for centuries. The feeling of looking at your own hands and knowing they’re changing everything.

Gwen clears her throat and gathers her skirts as she takes her seat again. “Now, the next item on the agenda is provisions.”

There’s a collective groan, and Gwen hides her smile behind a scroll. One by one, they take their seats, and the table isn’t round, and the places aren’t the same, but Morgana tangles their fingers together under the table and she’s very certain that the fact that it’s different is the miracle of it all. She knows know why she couldn’t decide on the new form of her old crown in her dream in the forge with the Queen—such a thing hasn’t been invented yet. But at their hands it will be, given

time.

And time is a given.

Chapter End Notes

FUCK DUDES...WE DID IT
Thank you 4 coming on this journey with me!! Every comment was a like a shot of pure adrenaline to my heart, I swear. I also just actually finished the show and I was so devastated that I started developing two concepts for dark, moody stuff, so like if I eventually publish Arthur and Morgana roleswap merthur + morgwen, or Merlin raids Avalon and kills the gods merthur, IM JUST COPING.....
<3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!